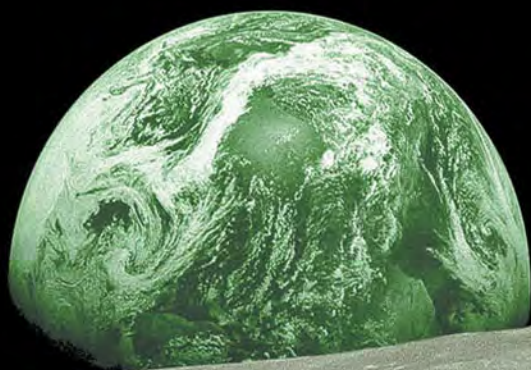


LIFEWORLD

*A fresh approach to
environmental philosophy*



**JOHN
FOSTER**

Lifeworld

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A Fresh Approach to Environmental Philosophy

John Foster

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‘The world and life are one.’

– Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* §5.621

*For
JAY and ROBIN
and their generation*

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This book originated in a course of lectures on environmental philosophy which I gave to undergraduates at Lancaster University in the Lent term of 2024. While this course naturally started with a broad overview of the subject as standardly understood, intended for students unfamiliar with it, the later lectures were drawn irresistibly towards an exposition of my own views of what, instead, it ought to be – views partly distilled from my earlier writings (especially Foster 2015, 2022), and partly evolving in response to the stimulus of giving the lectures. It was the latter element in particular which prompted me to think that the material (with some extension and elaboration) might usefully be given a more permanent form.

The resulting book is thus introductory in two senses. It introduces people to existing philosophical thinking on these topics through an account and critique of some classic contributions – under this aspect, I hope it may serve as a helpful guide for those coming newly to the field, or indeed newly to philosophy, of which this is now surely the area of most urgent contemporary relevance. But it also introduces, arising out of the critique, a fresh approach which may be of interest to anyone who already knows the trodden ways around the field in question and is disposed to share my own dissatisfaction with them.

Lest such a motivation for writing should sound merely academic, let me hasten to emphasise that the nature of that dissatisfaction is thoroughly and pressingly practical. Humanity is in the throes of an unprecedented environmental emergency, and I believe that environmental philosophy as overwhelmingly conceived and conducted hitherto has contributed, and is still contributing, to our collective failure to recognise that emergency for what it really is, and so to confront it anything like adequately. As I argue further in the Introduction, the stakes for fundamental thinking on these matters are really now that high.

If I had to sum up the book's purport in a sentence, I might say: cogent environmental philosophy is now as urgently needed as responsible environmental practice, and both really come down to taking our *animality* with proper seriousness.

* * * * *

Preface and Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my Lancaster colleagues Brian Garvey, Robert Geyer, Leonie Smith and Nicola Williams for the opportunity represented by the lectures and for help with their content and delivery.

Some of the ideas in Part IV were first aired in writings published on the website of the think tank Green House.¹ Thanks to Andrew Mearman, Rupert Read and Nadine Storey, colleagues in this venture, for valuable criticism and constructive disagreement.

My undertaking here is also a tribute to the memory of the literary and cultural critic F.R. Leavis, whose writings showed me how to think for myself when I was taking my first undergraduate steps in this direction through the medium of English literary studies. Leavisian themes will be recognised by those familiar with his work in Parts III and IV especially. But I have long aspired (see Foster 2001; 2013) to bring his insights into the state of our culture properly to bear on the deep environmental issues which they anticipate, clarify and enrich; the whole book is my best attempt to deliver on this aspiration.

Thanks are due to two referees for The White Horse Press – their very helpful comments and suggestions have, I hope, improved the overall outcome – and to the Press's Sarah Johnson for her encouragement and for the Index.

I must finally thank once again my wife Rose. She has supported me loyally and generously through a ramshackle career of academic and freelance work and on into retirement, confining herself to reproving only gently and occasionally my continuing obsession with these matters. If the ideas here do manage to gain any kind of traction, it will be owing very substantially to her.

The dedication to two of our grandchildren expresses the still undaunted hope in new life without which books like this cannot be written.

1. <https://www.greenhousethinktank.org/>

Why Environmental Philosophy?

Environmental concerns constitute the most urgently pressing arena in which philosophical thinking could possibly now be deployed. The study of that deployment also offers the best, because the most vitally relevant, present introduction to the practice of such thinking. That is the short answer to my opening question. The role of this chapter is to indicate how the following book expands on that answer.

By philosophical thinking, I mean the activity called *philosophy* in its fullest sense: rational enquiry and critique addressed to our understanding of reality's basic structures, to the assumptions on which that understanding is based and to the conceptual relations between those assumptions. Such thinking has always been warranted for its own sake by the kind of intelligence which human beings naturally bring to bear on their own condition. It is called forth here, however, not by purely speculative considerations but by the need to grapple with the overriding challenge of our time – a challenge which, properly recognised, raises starkly a range of difficult political, social and economic as well as ethical issues, while at the same time prompting some of the deepest questions that can be asked about ourselves and our relation to the world.

There are precedents for this coincidence of practical urgency with philosophical depth. One clear instance in the Western tradition is the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, which responded directly to the unravelling, frighteningly swift by the standards of that time, of a very long-established monarchical system of government during the English Civil Wars of the 1640s. His *Leviathan* (1651) sought to justify an all-powerful central authority founded in a social contract for mutual protection against what he saw as the inherent tendencies of human beings to constant conflict, the 'war of all against all'. He thought that such a war must have prevailed in the original 'state of nature' and it seemed evident to him that political breakdown could very readily return us to it. But the fierce pragmatism and immediate purport of his advocacy was at the same time explicitly grounded, through a radically empiricist account of human knowledge and action, in a thoroughly materialist metaphysics of motion, which 'produceth nothing but motion' (Hobbes 1651/1968: 86). It was, indeed, these metaphysical premises, easily condemned as atheistic in the religious controversialism of the day, which,

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quite as much as his uncompromising political conclusions, earned Hobbes his long notoriety. And in this his enemies were at least perceptive, since his analysis and prescription addressed to the crisis of his time depended for their cogency on his view of human nature and its place within nature at large – while his avowed aspiration was to tie practical philosophy (moral and political) back to metaphysical first principles with something of the demonstrative force which he admired in geometry and in the new seventeenth-century science. For as he conceived (and surely, with still-relevant insight), when our nature has brought us into the straits of existential crisis, we have to rethink that nature from the ground up.

Many of Hobbes' contemporaries considered that their civilisation was in grave danger, and some of them even believed that God's judgement of the world and reassumption of earthly sovereignty was at hand. That is, the crisis in which they were embroiled was on their own terms, genuinely existential. But it is fair to say that, even on those terms, they did not confront the order of peril which we face today: the prospect that much of the Earth will be rendered uninhabitable for human beings (and a vast number of other species besides) as a direct consequence of human activities which we seem collectively quite unable to abandon or even significantly to rein in. If the threatened disintegration of time-honoured social and religious relations, authority-structures and forms of legitimacy served as the starting-point for Hobbes' philosophical thinking, how much more then should our own apocalyptic prospect now provide the incentive for ours?

An existential crisis

It is important, moreover, that our apparent collective inability to confront that prospect should now be seen to constitute quite as significant a datum for philosophical attention as the prospect itself. For in the several decades during which looming climate and ecological threats have been acknowledged by informed opinion to be real, the mismatch between the scale of these threats and the cumulatively perfunctory tinkering which is all that humanity has managed in response has become ever more starkly evident. The history of those decades, it should now be clear in retrospect, has been one of steadily reinforced scientific corroboration of anthropogenic damage, accompanied by steadily lessening leeway in relation to key thresholds which must not be breached if we are to retain a safe terrestrial operating space for humanity; while simultaneously, despite the increasing popularity of a glib sustainability rhetoric along with much UN-sponsored intercontinental bustle, all we have seen when push comes to the actual shove of implementation

An existential crisis

have been half-measures at best – and these periodically suspended or reversed as foot-dragging politicians look anxiously to the next election, or to the temper of those whom they must placate to stay in power. This, it might well be supposed, amounts to existential crisis of a quite unprecedented kind. We seem to be caught up in a collective disabling of attention and paralysis of action compared with which all previous political, religious or social disruptions look like mere ripples in the smooth onward flow of human life. Trying to make sense of a disconnect of that order seems bound to raise serious questions about our self-understanding.

Once we have recognised the extent of that disparity between threat and response, indeed, the scope of such questioning becomes much broader than anything that the restrictive label ‘environmental’ tends to suggest. For if humanity appears to be so helplessly trashing the living world, it is hardly possible to avoid considering what we are doing that *for*. And that can lead, at least as regards the societies of the Northern and Western world which are still principally driving the damage, to some profoundly uncomfortable acknowledgements. Seen as being pertinaciously traded for a habitable planet, the characteristics of those societies can appear in a bitterly unflattering light. The achingly unfulfilling work suffered by so many, the obscene disparities in wealth and status, the associated hectic celebration of crass vulgarity, the appalling clutter of needless *stuff*, the ugly mass-produced artefacts everywhere, the vacantly passive entertainment, the frantic mobility, the muddled sexuality, the distracted twittering of ‘social media’, and perhaps above all the blighted childhood and adolescence of young people presented with this state of affairs as *normal* – all this starts to insist on itself as a kind of insanity, a radical dislocation, a pervasive and frightening alienation from the roots of life.

That sense can be reinforced by trying the thought-experiment proposed by Dougald Hine in his recent book *At Work in the Ruins*, and imagining an embarrassed admission by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that they had in fact got it all wrong, and actually we can safely extract and burn as much fossil fuel as we like. What then, asks Hine, about places like the Athabasca tar sands? – where,

within a few years, we’ve taken an area of old-growth forest the size of a small country, and turned whole swathes of it into Mordor. You can see the scars from space. (Hine 2023: 40)

His answer, surely persuasive, is that we would and ought to find our ability to treat living nature in this way not just repellent but profoundly disturbed – borderline insane – even should it transpire that the oil to be squeezed from that ravaged

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Albertan landscape would have no adverse implications whatsoever for climatic stability. Our having come to think ourselves entitled to rip out primordial forest on that scale, to obliterate so much life with such mechanised brutality for our own gain, surely represents a *human* disaster, a vivid demonstration and reinforcement of something gone drastically wrong with human being.

In the perspective suggested by these reflections, we may well be inclined to see these Northern and Western societies (with their latter-day Asian imitators) as posing such a threat to planetary life *because* they are thus radically deranged – with the corollary that no attempt to avert oncoming climate and ecological catastrophe which does not address this underlying condition has any prospect of even partial success. This is existential crisis indeed.

Environmental philosophy and environmental ethics

The scope and depth of the philosophical challenge presented by such crisis would not immediately suggest, as a principal way of addressing it, any form of applied ethical thinking. But if one searches for ‘environmental philosophy’ in the online Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (a valuable and conventionally authoritative compendium), what comes up is actually an article on environmental *ethics*, defined as ‘the discipline in philosophy that studies the moral relationship of human beings to, and also the value and moral status of, the environment and its non-human contents’. This certainly reflects the character of most philosophical interest in the environment as an emerging academic field, which from its beginnings in the 1970s marched in step with the growing environmental movement in politics and culture. Its mode of doing so was to concern itself overwhelmingly with questions about what kind of moral obligations might be invoked to inhibit the carelessly destructive use of the natural world in which humans were newly understood to be engaging. As such, it seemed to reflect a general trend within ethics itself, away from the metaethical and conceptual preoccupations of the earlier twentieth century and back towards deliberate practical relevance, as identified by Peter Singer in the Introduction to his edited collection *Applied Ethics*:

Does expertise in moral philosophy equip one to clarify the muddy waters of popular moral debates? Does a knowledge of normative ethical theories make it possible to apply such theories to real ethical problems? Can such an application lead to more defensible positions on these questions? The possibility of an affirmative answer to these questions began to be widely recognised only during the 1960s when first the American civil rights movement and then the Vietnam

Environmental philosophy and environmental ethics

war and the rise of student activism began to draw philosophers into the study of moral issues: equality, justice, war and civil disobedience. (Singer 1986: 3)

The burgeoning environmental movement, borne historically on the same broad counter-cultural wave, very naturally saw its concerns as calling for essentially the same kind of applied-ethical consideration.

But environmental philosophy is *not* applied ethics. In making this point explicitly, I have been anticipated by Simon Hailwood (2019), who sees the enterprise as having a much broader scope – as, in fact, essentially one of philosophical critique addressed to traditional forms of thought underpinning modern social and personal life generally. As he observes, environmental concern does not readily fit the template of those ‘popular moral debates’ – about the permissibility of abortion, say, or of various other medical interventions, of capital punishment, homosexuality or similarly controversial strands within the broad human tapestry. Rather, it typically regards the relation of that tapestry itself to the natural world out of which it is woven. Accepting this, however, as my opening paragraphs will have suggested, I nevertheless want to mount here a rather different argument. ‘Applying ethics’ is typically a matter of bringing a particular normative theory (utilitarian, Kantian or whatever) to bear on various hard questions about human relations and mutual responsibilities arising in each area, or (more helpfully) of comparing and contrasting the purported answers to which different such theories point; and in these applications, it is simply taken for granted that ethical thinking in its received forms, as a very deep-seated way of reflecting on *inter-human* relations, is going to be relevant. But for environmental issues, we should surely not beg the questions whether other kinds of relation may be in question, or other kinds of thinking needed: and we need to be especially wary of the possibility that an ethical framing might actually obscure what is at issue.

Environmental philosophy, that is, does not transcend applied ethics in the way that philosophy of law, for example, transcends it – by addressing itself to the evident incapacity of moral considerations wholly to explain the legal systems and judgements which form such a significant feature of human affairs. Interesting philosophy of law – the standard instance here is H.L.A. Hart’s classic *The Concept of Law* (Hart 1961) – concerns itself very largely with exploring and explaining how the law is not just ‘applied morality’, morality codified and institutionalised with penal sanctions for non-compliance variously annexed. (Luckily, not everything morally wrong is illegal, as demonstrated by the well-worn examples of adultery or ordinary lying; nor is everything which is illegal in some or other jurisdiction

Why Environmental Philosophy?

immoral.) Environmental philosophy as I shall present it does indeed prompt us to think about where the boundaries of the ethical domain, or of helpfully ethical explanation, are to be drawn, but it does so not by showing, as in the legal case, how we operate more or less successfully with a recognition of those boundaries in a particular field, but in response to the vigorous attempt to *trespass across* them which has actually constituted environmental ethics to date. Environmental philosophy, on that account, has its ongoing agenda set not just by the critical considerations to which Hailwood points, but by the generic failure of environmental *ethics* to deliver, and by what that failure suggests about the nature of the human world.

This claim must not be misunderstood. The failure of environmental ethics to deliver does not consist straightforwardly in our climate and ecological plight's remaining acute, despite there having been, for example, an academic journal called *Environmental Ethics* published regularly since 1979. It would be almost as sensible to complain that humans have been reflecting systematically on their conduct since Socrates but the millennium has still not arrived. We are very ill-advised to burden ethical thinking of any sort with such utopian expectations. On the other hand, a list of causes for our collective inertia in the face of oncoming disaster, while it must obviously include factors like the power of vested commercial interests, the lies purveyed by a prostituted Press, the trivialising effects of social media, widespread carbon-intensive consumerism, and so on, would be seriously incomplete without some reference to the way in which environmental ethics has misled us over the period since it first arose. The point is that thinking in ethical mode about human affairs – about the recurrent struggles between our self-preoccupation and our awareness of the reality of other people – although often inconclusive, to the point sometimes of baffling and frustrating us, cannot lead us fundamentally astray. But that mode not only provides no analogous reassurance of its relevance to questions about the relations of humans to other natural entities; its characteristic form has been such as radically to *misconstrue* those relations.

Over-extending ethics

That form has always been more or less *extensionist*, ever since the American conservationist Aldo Leopold (no philosopher, but a bold and suggestive thinker about these issues) first promoted the idea of a Land Ethic in the 1940s. He saw this conception as enlarging the boundaries of the community to which humans belong, and within which their moral obligations subsist, 'to include soils, waters, plants and animals, or collectively: the land' (Leopold 1949: 204). Taken up by

Over-extending ethics

ethical philosophers, this became the project of identifying moral value or *moral standing* in some or all of those non-human entities, as the ground of a requirement on human activity to treat them no longer just as economic resources at best and obstacles to 'progress' at worst, but with the kind of consideration due to whatever can be disrespected, harmed or oppressed. This is a project clearly seeking to revise ethics itself as part of applying it to a new subject matter; it tries to go beyond the traditional focus on what is required by, and what are the grounds for, the Golden Rule of treating other people as you would have them treat you. Once we are seeing things in this light, we can recognise that even just thinking about our obligations to future human generations (as, most importantly, to leave them a habitable world) extends this core requirement significantly, since of course future people cannot treat present people in any way at all. But the environmental-ethical impulse has always been to suspect extension only thus far of being still liable to preoccupation exclusively with human interests and concerns, a preoccupation which can be recognised to have brought about environmental threats to the world's habitability in the first place. Correspondingly, philosophical effort has gone into seeking for other objects of ethical obligation, and claiming 'moral standing' or rights-bearing status for variously non-human living things, species, ecosystems and even some non-living things (rivers, watersheds and so forth) within which the biosphere is embedded.

That whole project is, I believe, fundamentally misconceived. I hope to support this judgement through considering the range of classic attempts to pursue the project which is examined in Part II of this book, but it may be helpful to sketch here in a brief example the kind of misconception which I take to be generally involved. I shall draw this example from what is perhaps the least ambitious exercise of ethical extension beyond the human realm, the attribution of moral standing to at least some non-human animals on the seemingly persuasive utilitarian basis that they too are sentient beings, capable of suffering and so with an interest in not being made to suffer. Here is Peter Singer's claim (originally made in his 1975 paper 'All Animals Are Equal', and essentially unvaried in a number of subsequent reworkings) about what such recognition of sentience entails:

If a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with the like suffering – in so far as rough comparisons can be made – of any other being. (Singer 1986: 222)

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The ‘principle of equality’ here is that of giving equal consideration to equal interests no matter whose interests they are: correspondingly, the strength of the interest which sentience naturally has in avoiding suffering is to be determined only by the intensity of the suffering, not by who or what is experiencing it. But if each unit of suffering, as it were, counts the same ethically, whatever kind of being undergoes it, then one very obvious application of that principle (to which Singer unflinchingly proceeds) is that subjecting innumerable sentient creatures like cows, sheep and pigs to painful or even significantly uncomfortable lives followed by industrialised slaughter, as the price of not subjecting human beings to the much milder suffering involved in converting to a vegetarian diet, will be ethically ruled out.

The key issue for present purposes, however, is not to do with the rights and wrongs of vegetarianism; it is to do with the process of ‘rough comparison’ parenthetically glossed over in the course of the claim just quoted. And what we should note about this process is not that its upshots are *rough*, as when we say that one pain is more intense than another without locating them any more exactly on some scale of intensity, but that they are indeed the upshots of a *process of comparison*. For it is in that process itself that the essence of moral action lies, and it cannot of its very nature play the role here envisaged for it.

To see this clearly, ask if I could act morally towards you by weighing up and deciding *for you* how much your distress was going to count in some particular context of action, and then without further ado, or any reference to you, acting in your own interest to minimise that distress. The answer is surely that I could not. Giving due moral consideration to others cannot consist simply in trying to adopt what Sidgwick famously called ‘the point of view of the Universe’ towards them (Sidgwick 1907: 420). (By contrast, when I weigh your bag of flour on my accurate scales, they register what we might call the Universe’s position regarding its weight – a kilo being a kilo, relativity aside, for anyone anywhere.) It is vital to realise that we only reach the terrain of morality when responding properly to your distress or suffering means incorporating your voice, along with those of all relevant others, into a process of considering what particular forms and occasions of suffering are going to count for what practical purposes as equal to or outweighing what: an essentially collaborative business not of registering but of *assigning* ‘weights’, in which all the voices actually or potentially involved count equally – something which we can only be sure they are doing when we are finding *reasons* for action, that is, justifications for particular doings and refrainings, which we could offer

Over-extending ethics

to all in the expectation that none could reasonably dissent. (That is how I can refer my action concerning your pain ‘to you’, even when I don’t or can’t actually consult you on the matter – I can temper it to reasons for action which I believe will find impartial acceptance.) The way utilitarianism is typically set up in terms of putatively-quantitative pleasure- and pain-accounting tends to obscure this utterly indispensable feature of moral activity, but J.S. Mill at least was clear about it. A too-little-regarded passage of his *Utilitarianism* asks: ‘What is there to decide whether a particular pleasure is worth purchasing at the cost of a particular pain, except the feeling *and judgement* of the experienced?’ (my italics) – he having just noted that if the experienced differ, as they will frequently do, they must reach agreement, as ‘the only tribunal to be referred to’, on the question of *quantity* as well as quality of pleasure and pain. (Mill 1863/1988: 58–59) The process contains no analogy, in other words, to identifying comparative pain-intensity as a Geiger-counter identifies comparative radioactivity, from the point of view of the Universe.

But of course, the most we can typically do as regards the suffering or distress of non-human animals *is* to weigh it up, and quantify their interests, on their behalf; they lack any capacity to be active participants in any such assessment, just insofar as they lack the capacity to consider, and so to be meaningfully offered, reasons. And in just the same way, the process of offering acceptable reasons for action to those who *can* consider them does not serve to introduce the necessary impartiality, since all those putative interlocutors will themselves be human. Thus not only are non-humans never moral agents, they cannot ever be full moral subjects in their own right either.

This incapacity is occluded when we are dealing with the kinds of case which Singer has principally in mind. At least in the West, we have become much more sensitive to the grosser kinds of animal suffering than we used to be – see Keith Thomas’s (1983) *Man and the Natural World* for the cultural history of this transition. As part of that development, our response to such suffering could be said to have leached over the edge of the moral terrain. This will seem natural enough if we think of morality as a human practice, since in at least the relevant respects the boundary between humans and our other animal kindred is somewhat blurred. We share the ‘language’ constituted by the elementary expressions of pain (and pleasure) with a range of other creatures, typically higher mammals, who are sufficiently close to us evolutionarily and ethologically; to that extent, our increased sensitivity *can* incorporate something like their ‘voices’ into consideration of those of our activities which might impact upon them drastically. (Equally, we

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don't normally have to *ask* some fellow human whether he or she would prefer the torture to stop.) But this possibility lapses when we move away from interactions involving stark pain or terror, to those where merely different strengths of interest are in question. And Singer is proposing here, we must remember, a quite general extension of the moral domain to include *all* the interests of *all* sentient animals, a purview which must readily run to cases of just that kind.

Where I live, for instance, one often sees lorries transporting sheep to and from auction in the nearby market town; these vehicles trundle along with scores of the animals packed in and often stacked two layers deep in specially-designed trailers. Is this treatment, which must at least frighten and disorient them, cruel to the sheep? Is it crueller to them than it would be cruel to the farmers to insist on their all reverting, crook in hand, to driving their flocks along the lanes and highroads? Even supposing there to be defensible answers to these questions, the fact that only humans, who are obviously an interested party, get to decide the 'balance of interests' in such cases, means that any supposed moral obligations to the sheep which we identify will only ever be pseudo-obligations, obliging us towards what are correspondingly only pseudo- rather than genuine moral subjects, because obliging us only as far as we are actually prepared to be obliged.

Pseudo-constraint and bad faith

The real point, however, is that this is not a difficulty arising only for Singer's utilitarian take on these matters. Rather, it is modelling our stance towards the non-present-human in terms of ethical obligation *at all* which is radically flawed. In Part II of this book, I shall consider representative variations on the extensionist theme: discussions of the welfare or rights of future human generations, the flourishing or putative rights of other living things, and the kind of standing claimed for species, ecosystems or other environmental features. I shall seek to show that what is recognisably the same objection as I have made to Singer can be raised in each of these cases. But I hope that at least the general form of that objection can now already be appreciated. It is that *all* these purported moral subjects – non-present (future) humans and present (and future) non-humans – can only ever be in one way or another the guests of presently-existing humans on the terrain, or in the business, of morality: and it is inherent in the status of a guest to be accommodated only at the will of the host. But morality, and in particular any morality supposed to be capable of inhibiting human destructiveness towards the natural world, must present us with constraints *on* human will, not with constraints the content and

Pseudo-constraint and bad faith

extent of which are configured *by* human will. ‘Constraints’ of the latter order risk, like their concomitant ‘obligations’, operating only as pseudo-constraints. And crucially, the licence thus provided for bad faith – for covert denialism, escapism, political cowardice and sheer *incuria* – powerfully nourishes the roots of our collective failure as yet to take looming climate and ecological catastrophe anything like seriously enough.

Again, a brief example of how that failure works will be helpful. A real-life instance of the way in which environmental-ethical extensionism can lead us astray comes very fortuitously to hand in a *Guardian* opinion piece as I write. John Harris reports that ‘something very interesting is happening in the UK, to do with nature’, something which now ‘seems to be blurring over from the cultural sphere into politics’ (Harris 2024). This is the rediscovery, which he links with Covid lockdowns, of access to and activity in the outdoors – what the Norwegians call *friluftsliv* (‘open-air-life’), something which he thinks has latterly been tending to lapse in screen-ridden urban Britain. Its renewal involves, Harris claims, ‘a rejection of any idea of natural spaces being off limits’, and he quotes a walking project which explicitly relates this rejection to the climate emergency: ‘If we are to combat climate change, perhaps we must also ... embrace viscerally the natural world and its rhythms’. Now the re-emergence of this mindset, if it did become at all general, would indeed be interesting and important. It might mark the beginnings of a reconnection with the non-human natural world, not as something belonging to us (so that we could generously bestir ourselves to ‘give nature a home’, as the RSPB logo well-meaningly but absurdly puts it), but rather as something to which we belong, and vitally need to recognise ourselves as belonging. Harris, however, also presents as a promising political development out of this shift in thought and practice, the notion of ‘giving nature legal rights’, and records with evident approval that a district council in East Sussex last year

passed a motion that opened the way for the River Ouse being granted rights – to flow free from pollution and sustain native biodiversity – based on the Universal Declaration of River Rights created via international cooperation in 2017. (Harris 2024)

He notes that British officialdom at large still resists this idea, but clearly hopes that such fogleyish resistance will soon crumble.

Suppose now, though, that officialdom had actually *embraced* ‘rights for nature’ – would that encourage us to feel that, as he puts it, we would thereby not only be protecting the planet, but honouring ‘something sacred’ in doing so?

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The point is surely that to approach the purportedly sacred in this way would be to drain it of any sacredness. The deeply factitious nature of such a proceeding is evidently subversive of anything genuinely ‘visceral’, which is what a real response to the sacred should be. For, just as ‘rights’ which we might accord to sheep not to be trucked around in big lorries would not be *recognised* so much as *confected*, so *a fortiori* would be rights for rivers not to be polluted or diverted. A properly recognisable right must reflect a claim which one would find oneself justified in making on others were one in the position of the putative bearer of that right, but nothing is ever a claim which one would make if one were a river. And we should always tacitly know, as would officialdom, that essentially these ‘rights’ *were* confected, and that how far they extended and, more importantly, what they prohibited, would represent only what we were prepared for the moment (and until circumstances, such as economic conditions, happened to alter), to refrain from doing. Such ‘rights’ would afford protection not so much to rivers as to our pretence that we were honouring a real claim in so refraining. As such, they would serve as a tacit justifying framework within which larger and much more consequential exercises of bad faith could thrive. They would, for instance, coexist happily with, and covertly encourage, the kind of ‘political commitment to net zero’ which can be suspended or even reversed at the drop of a clutch of economic indicators. *Contra* Harris, in fact, it would not be a positive development to see the stance towards non-human nature which we increasingly desperately need to recover as anything like a recognition of rights, or more generally as an acceptance of moral obligations to the non-human. Since either kind of claim can and will be trumped by other, more human-focused needs and demands as these become more pressing, it would instead be to have sold an absolutely vital pass.

The picture of our situation which I am here suggesting can be brought into sharper focus through a contrast with that drawn by Stephen Gardiner in his book *A Perfect Moral Storm* (Gardiner 2011). He there identifies with an acute eye the various forms of what he calls ‘moral corruption’ apparent in our dealings with environmental issues: the manifold ways in which, as societies and as individuals, we strive to minimise, postpone, rearrange into something more comfortable or effectively just wriggle out of what he takes to be our genuine moral obligations to recast embedded but environmentally destructive patterns of present living. It is, for him, because we encounter these obligations – to future people in respect of the natural world, and to nature itself – in a context of unprecedented global, intergenerational and institutional challenges (the ‘perfect storm’ of his title), that

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we are so liable to the temptations of responding to them in what he labels the ‘morally corrupt’ ways which I have myself brought under the general heading of ‘bad faith’. But my own account locates the source of these difficulties at a deeper level. Gardiner’s newly exigent factors – the global scale and intergenerational reach of environmental issues and the maladaptation of existing institutions and theoretical models to accommodate them – are certainly all in play. The incentive to compromise our responses is, however, already at work in our configuring the requirements under which the natural world places us as *moral obligations* in the first place. Insistence on that configuration, I am going to argue, is what gives practical bad faith its footing, and it is the source and character of that insistence which we therefore need to understand.

Equally, it is worth contrasting my argument against moral extensionism with that mounted from an ecofeminist standpoint by the late Australian philosopher Val Plumwood (2002). She sees such extensionism essentially as patronising those whom she terms ‘Earth others’, by bringing them within the scope of moral consideration only to the extent that they can be represented as sharing qualifying characteristics, such as sentience or the ability to communicate their emotions and needs, which remain paradigmatically exhibited by humans. This ‘neo-Cartesian’ approach, as she labels it, should for her be rejected as merely a variation on the basic dualism which draws a sharp dividing line between humans as rational beings and the rest of nature. There are doubts about the ecofeminist identification of such dualism, at any rate in its stronger versions, and I address these in Chapter 2; but insofar as it marks a distinction which humans have tended to draw, blurring it at its edges (she thinks) only further embeds it in a mode of repressive tolerance, and is really no more respectful of the non-human than men would truly respect women by conceding to them a limited – or even a moderately extensive – range of roles still thought of as properly filled by males. But the human ‘solidarity’ with Earth others in all their otherness with which Plumwood wants to replace this supposedly patronising non-respect is for me just as questionable a form of extensionism as is Singer’s. For if considerations of solidarity are to govern our behaviour, their claim to do so cannot (again) be genuinely ethical when what will count as an appropriate response to it is determinable only by one party to the relationship. I do not demonstrate any virtue of solidarity with your concerns by deciding *for you* how forcefully they should be advanced. Solidarity based on respect is indeed, as she emphasises, anti-hegemonic; treating another individual or group respectfully requires attentiveness to their specific actuality, openness to their otherness

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– it requires hearing their voice. I do not get as far as respect, however, if I hear only what I *produce* as your voice, and the voice of the non-human is always thus ventriloquised. Even when that is done with careful attentiveness, the final arbiters of whether it has been done carefully enough can only be the ventriloquist and his or her human interlocutors. But pseudo-respect and pseudo-solidarity cannot genuinely constrain humans in their dealings with non-humans any more than can pseudo-obligations or the recognition of pseudo-rights.

Someone might protest here that even sham recognition of a river's 'rights' to remain unpolluted, or an affectation of solidarity with (say) the fish living in it, must be better, environmentally speaking, than going on blithely polluting the river. This is, of course, the crux. Clearly, in the short term and from the perspective of environmental prudence, it *is* always better not to pollute the river. But doing so on the grounds of a pseudo-obligation to the river, or a pseudo-commitment to the fish, would pollute instead (or, much more probably, as well) our understanding of what is involved in a stance of real respect for elemental forces within a biosphere which does not belong to us. It would infect that understanding with the bad faith in which we plume ourselves on explicitly deferring to 'constraints' tacitly acknowledged at the same time to be such that we can override them at need. And that would disable any prospect of genuine resistance, when the inevitable crunches come, to the all-too-human forces driving against real respect for nature.

These forces, it must here be emphasised, do not comprise only the malign actors – the big corporations, hedge-fund billionaires, spineless democratic politicians and so forth – whom it has become almost routine for concerned commentators to finger in this connection. These powerful vested interests are indeed always in play and always strongly disposed to promote climate-destabilising and ecologically-destructive patterns of collective behaviour, and to exploit any liability to bad faith in doing so. But bad faith is such a thoroughly insidious threat in environmental contexts because it also offers a standing temptation to the pursuit of a much more widespread and deeply vested interest: that of the majority Western (and Westernised) population in the continued consumerism which has come to substitute for meaning and purpose in so many ordinary existences. And when we probe the nature of that fiercely insistent interest, it begins to look like that of a genuinely pathological condition of addiction. For how else are we to explain the self-destructive and life-defeating assault on the natural world now everywhere so grievously visible, in order to maintain in being such a meretricious and humanly disfigured civilisation as ours? Against this background, to which my concluding

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chapters will return, the standard environmental-ethical promotion of pseudo-obligations is not just theoretically deficient, but practically very dangerous.

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So much, then, for my intentions in the strand of this book which comprises critical accounts of various established writers and positions in environmental ethics. That sequence of cameos, beyond its purely propaedeutic purpose, is meant to diversify and reinforce the argument which I have just been sketching: that the ethical model of the demands placed on human beings by their environmental situation has failure to rise to those demands *built into it*. The fact that this argument is being pursued as part of a text which aims to summarise and discuss some hitherto landmark contributions to the field, for readers who may not have encountered some or any of them before, I believe only increases the book's educational value. For those interested in philosophy of any kind cannot begin too soon to learn that no philosophical thinking worth much lacks such an agenda, nor can it ever rest in mere description of competing arguments from a supposedly detached viewpoint; the most resolutely neutral-seeming such description has its own agenda – if only that of seeming, for some immediate purpose, academic or other, not to have an agenda.

But that critical argument, to the extent that it is successful, immediately raises the question: how *otherwise* are we to conceive of the demands on us? An attempt to answer this question forms the second, and in intention constructive, main strand of this book. That is the overtly metaphysical strand which, as I began by suggesting, is inescapable for any philosophy offering to address existential crisis. For of course, environmental philosophy cannot do that merely by pointing out what is amiss with extensionist environmental ethics. It has to deal, as Hobbes sought to deal, substantively with human nature and its place within nature at large, and with how these are at stake in our epochal existential challenge.

The best route into such considerations from where we have just reached is, I think, to ask: *why* has the impulse to capture relations between humans and the rest of nature on the template of an extensionist morality been so powerful that it has managed to establish itself, despite deficiencies which once noticed seem as if they ought to be glaring, as the default mode of philosophical thinking in this arena? A preliminary sketch for an answer to this question points us towards the roots both of environmental concern and of human self-understanding, and may serve to indicate the way in which I shall try to link these.

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The fundamental environmental recognition, triggered as such by specifically twentieth-century developments but inherited in its broad shape from Muir, Thoreau, Ruskin and the great Romantics, is that the natural world is not there for humans to do whatever they can with. It is, in a very deep sense, *not ours*, but as it were lent to us as we pass through – although in what is now a predominantly secular age, we can no longer reliably cash that idea out by holding that it continues to belong all the while to God. (Nor did the trope that we ‘borrow it from our children’, despite expressing something important about the transitoriness of each generation, ever really make sense: if they don’t own it, we can’t be borrowing it from them, and if they do, why them ahead of us?) With this difficult node of thought go the related ideas of *decentring* humanity, of viewing ourselves no longer in the old religious way as the point and apex of Creation, but within a natural world to which we are internally related – a world, our being just one dependent part of which is thoroughly constitutive of our species being. (If something does belong to me, by contrast, how I use it or change it, or damage it, are at my discretion, which entails my being *externally* related to it, that is, remaining the same *me* through any uses or changes to which I put it.) Despite subsequent attenuation and misrepresentation as it has moved into the political mainstream – despite, most obviously, the ‘sustainability’ paradigm which takes nature to be there for present humans, with an eye to their posterity, to do whatever they can with, but *more carefully* – this essentially ecological recognition remains at the core of the environmental impulse.

We can confirm its place there by a further variation on the thought-experiment from Hine which we have already tried. Suppose that, as well as being reassured that there would be no climate consequences from extirpating a swathe of pristine old-growth forest, we could (*per impossibile*) be wholly confident that any ecological consequences adverse to humanity could also be avoided. Imagine, that is, that we understood the original complex of ecosystems in such detail that we could reproduce its carbon-sequestration capacities, reinstate its full range of biodiversity elsewhere, and generally ensure that no losses of ‘natural capital’ followed from the clearance. The sense that, nevertheless, we should still be doing something repellent, surely remains in full force. To the extent that it does so, resistance to taking the natural world as at human disposal cannot be wholly accounted for by our comparatively recent and scientifically-informed awareness of unguessable ecological complexity, which we disregard at our own peril. Environmentally-minded people standardly invoke the precautionary principle in response to such

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actual or threatened depredations, and very sensibly, because their effects are almost always incalculably destructive simply from our own perspective. But what really lies behind this reaction is something much more like the ancient Greek intuition of *aidos*: the feeling that one must walk humbly and delicately in such contexts in order to propitiate unseen forces. In this light, blundering in with bulldozers hubristically travesties both our proper relation to the forest, and our own nature.

But then, how is that understanding of our situation to make sense of itself within a natural world of which we have got used to conceiving in scientific-realist fashion, as essentially a concourse of spatiotemporally located and causally interacting material objects – a world which, as such, and while no longer to be thought of as gifted to us, does indeed seem to be available for us to do whatever we find ourselves competent to get away with to whichever bits of it we can reach? As we have built up that picture of empirical reality since the Scientific Revolution, and developed in the same spirit a vast and ever-increasing technical armoury for manipulating it, we have correspondingly come to represent the whole natural world to ourselves as what Heidegger in his great essay on technology so presciently called ‘standing-reserve’ (Heidegger 1954/1993). On that view, which economic models (‘natural capital’ and so forth) merely spell out, the world confronts us as a global reservoir of potential *resources*, and we ourselves are by the same token constructed over against it in the position of resource *users*, wielders (ideally, increasingly careful ones, as our ecological knowledge improves) of whatever we find instrumentally available. In this perspective (Anthropocenic, as it has come to be called), the idea of a world radically unavailable to humans as discretionary exploiters and manipulators seems as though it can find nowhere to lodge.

Nowhere, that is, except apparently on the terrain of morality. For *within* the world so pictured, the only unambiguous experience which we now have of encountering something which does not stand to the prospective agent as a potential reserve or resource, is our moral awareness of the inherent value of other people. All normative ethical systems in their different ways and with different degrees of emphasis recognise human beings as fundamentally not to be used purely as means or instruments by one another. (Significant aesthetic objects have a possibly similar value status, but much more tangentially and perhaps derivatively; nor is there the same absolute prohibition on reducing them to instruments as there is in the human case – you aren’t blameworthy for using even the Titian as a life-raft if your alternative is drowning when Venice floods). So if the domain of moral requirement could indeed be plausibly extended, either via our duties to other

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people in respect of the natural world or via duties owed directly to that world, so that that domain embraced nature as a whole, or the living things within it, or even just large numbers of such things (woven as these all are into intricately interdependent ecological totalities) – then we should have gone a long way towards formulating an understanding of our natural situatedness answering to that fundamental environmental intuition.

It is in the light of this aspiration that the failure of such extensionism is philosophically, as well as practically and politically, important. What these attempts to represent nature as unavailable for use purely at present human discretion can all be shown to be doing, I have suggested, is to leave questions about how far and for what purposes it is to be treated as thus unavailable, more or less tacitly at present human discretion. They do so because, as I have also suggested, morality inherently resists being extended beyond the presently inter-human – it remains always an inalienably human practice of mutual acknowledgement and recognition by really-existing persons. Actual human interaction with other humans is not just one important area of the moral terrain, nor even its home ground from which we have to start – it *is* the moral terrain. And that in turn, I shall now go on to suggest, is because morality is a practically very salient aspect of a world encountered under the aspect of rational agency – which is the world as it presents itself to the kind of reflexive consciousness specifically characterising the life-form of human beings. For moral constraint as the unavailability of other people to be used merely at one's discretion is fundamentally, as Kant saw especially clearly, recognition of their equal status with oneself as sharers of this rational life-form. In the nature of a world presenting reasons for action to beings conscious of confronting a range of options, any reasons one could have for disregarding other people's ends would be to exactly the same extent warrants for one's own to be similarly disregarded, and so would essentially defeat themselves. Morality, that is, as genuine practical constraint, has its natural and only habitable niche within the *human lifeworld*.

This concept gives the book its title and underpins its thematic unity. The 'lifeworld' idea itself stems from the German philosopher Edmund Husserl, the founder of the philosophical approach known as phenomenology, for whom it characterised the realm of primary significances – the structure of beliefs, values and cultural practices which organises meaningful activity in everyday life. This realm is ultimately constituted for Husserl by conscious subjectivity. As will appear, I want to accord the concept a similar provenance but give it a different inflection – both more post-Darwinian and metaphysically rather more demanding. For the

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phenomenological impulse, whether in Husserl himself or in later practitioners such as Heidegger, is to articulate our engagement with this lifeworld as *basic*, and in particular as what always grounds the further and specialised construction of physical science – with the consequence that science’s abstracted model of matter in motion, devoid of value, cannot be taken to give us the fundamental reality grounding human experience. Out of this impulse has flowed a stream of eco-phenomenological thinking (see in particular Evernden 1985, Brown and Toadvine 2003) which seeks to picture broadly environmentalist concerns as ways of relating to the ‘lifeworld’ of significances so understood. This is deliberately contrasted with a ‘natural environment’ considered merely as the biological upshot of what is ultimately the world for physics, accepting which model is supposed to sell the pass on environmental value from the outset. But I am seeking to extend the lifeworld idea beyond this (on its own terms insightful) deployment. What I want to mark with it is rather the way in which the world as we must inhabit it, even taken to be underpinned by the objective world of natural science (as we actually cannot help taking it, a point to which I shall return), must still be understood to express the species-specific reflexively-conscious *life-form* which human being in its ineliminable subjectivity expresses. And it will emerge that in reaching this recognition, and more importantly in coming to understand how we are to deploy it, the route through rejection of environmental ethics as hitherto conceived will have been crucial.

For if morality can only be a present human business because we recognise that encountering the world as an arena of rational agency is an expression of our specifically human life-form, we are already with that recognition on the way to asking why encountering it as a world of spatiotemporal material objects in causal relations should not be regarded as having essentially the same status. But this naturalised Kantian question leads towards what I should like to call a *deep naturalist* understanding of the world in both its material and its moral reality. In this light we can recognise its comprising spatiotemporal material objects (involved in events of which there is always ultimately a full causal history to be given in terms of such objects and events), and its at the same time always offering us reasons guiding rather than dictating our actions, as complementary aspects of its being a radically *humanly-configured* world. This world, it might then seem, must spring from the human form of life in just the same way as the echolocatively-configured world of attended reverberations constitutes the world for the bat. More generally, the pattern here is the way any creature’s *Umwelt* or life-formed world – a concept

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originally promoted by the biologist and father of modern ethology Jakob von Uexküll (1909) – necessarily expresses its characteristic species being, and necessarily constitutes the reality to be negotiated by individuals of that species. For why (on Earth) should we take *Homo sapiens* to be uniquely privileged in this regard? – how could our own life-formed reality, seen in this light, be non-question-beggingly posited as *the* world, the absolute reference-class for those of all other life-forms? In this acknowledgement of the world embracing us as inescapably a human world, but subsisting ultimately on the terms of life-formation in general, we can begin to glimpse an understanding of human-natural situatedness which answers to the deep environmental or bio-egalitarian intuition without any reliance on forced and implausible extensions of morality. More: I go on to argue that we cannot then resist recognising the explanatory primacy of creative life, not just in humans but in all its manifestations, for any such understanding which is to be habitable by reflexively conscious beings.

That recognised primacy could help us towards a better practical-political chance of averting catastrophe, in ways which I conclude the book by exploring. For if we can grasp the dependence not just of humans and all they do, but of the physical world itself which confronts them, on the creative stream of life of which they are one manifestation, we may begin to recuperate that destructive alienation from the roots of our existence which I noted at the outset. And that would be to address at last a derangement which has warped so much in the culture and circumstances of Northern and Western society since the Scientific Revolution, and without overcoming which our climate and ecological plight must remain simply intractable.

The metaphysics of lifeworld could serve also the purpose (recurring here to my opening paragraphs) of connecting our most urgent present concerns illuminatingly with some of the deepest and most long-standing issues in philosophy, and so of inducting into these issues students or others unfamiliar with them. For here will be recognised, by anyone who *is* already familiar with this crux, an approach to the ancient stand-off between realism and idealism – between the powerful intuition that the physical world must precede and explain mind, and the equally powerful intuition that, except within the purview of mind, that world cannot have the spatiotemporal qualities necessary to constitute it as physical in the first place. (A mind-independent world must have quantitative dimensions *in itself*; for instance, but all quantity must be metric-dependent, that is, mind-dependent – an issue to which I return in Chapter 8.) If in grappling with how to understand our

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profound and exigent environmental dilemma the student begins to appreciate how existential crisis is underlain by, and brings to an especially sharp focus, this challenge to human self-understanding in nature which has preoccupied fundamental thought since the Greeks, he or she will have been given as good a start in philosophy (that is, in reading and thinking philosophically for him- or herself) as it is perhaps possible to get.

Introducing this whole line of reflection thus constitutes the book's second, but I hope convincingly integrated, strand. The critique which I make of ethical extensionism has been anticipated in respect of particular extensionist positions (see for example French 1999), though not as far as I'm aware with the kind of general application which I seek to give it. But the manner of my turn to the lifeworld concept, and the inflexion I give this, are – again, as far as I am aware – original in the philosophical treatment of these issues, and their value in helping to make sense of and respond to existential crisis is here being worked out and tested for the first time.

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It remains only to provide a very brief prospectus of how its interweaving of these strands organises the book.

Part I identifies structural features of environmental issues, in terms both of their empirical profile and of their conceptual framing, which have inclined philosophers to develop extensionist models of moral requirements intended to constrain present human overreach. Part II takes up the critique of such models already adumbrated, examining prominent instances from the literature of purported moral obligations to future people, to non-human living things and to the whole 'biotic community'. It finds in all of them essentially the same kind of defect: in none do the envisaged 'others' have a substantial enough putatively moral presence over against present humans for the supposed constraint to be genuine. The general conclusion is that our proper relations to our natural context cannot be captured on any ethical template.

Given what now hangs on these relations, it therefore becomes vital to understand their nature and force differently. Part III sets out to elaborate and defend an alternative picture of how humanity stands on an equal footing with other life-forms. I argue that both empirical nature and the rational domain of value are to be grasped as complementary aspects of our species-specific human lifeworld, thus

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relativised to our reflexively conscious form of life as are the *Umwelten* of other life-forms to their respective modes of apprehension.

The notion of a relativised reality, however – one which humans as a life-form *construct* – remains inescapably paradoxical, as the exploration from this perspective of certain longstanding metaphysical puzzles concerning space, time and universals seems to confirm. Thus, while the naturalism which takes the fundamental structure of the world as it presents itself to human beings to characterise ‘reality in itself’ is from a bio-egalitarian standpoint untenable, the deeper understanding which relativises that world-structure to the human life-form turns out to be *unstateable* – the attempt to express it in straightforward ontological propositions has the self-defeating or self-cancelling nature of all paradox.

It is for a grasp of how we ongoingly inhabit such ‘deep-naturalist’ paradoxicality that we must invoke life’s fundamental creativity. In the two concluding chapters of Part III, I argue that finding over against us and situating us a world for which we are also creatively responsible only appears to be impossible while we overlook the actual nature of creativity, a power which demonstrably operates not only through multiple aspects of human life but throughout the whole living world. Essentially this is a power, unique to life but immediately and intimately knowable as such if we turn our minds aright, of creating or summoning-forth for itself the promptings and affordances on which it subsists. Recognition of this creative principle of life, in fact, is metaphysically fundamental: it is as deep as speculation about the nature of reality can take us. This is a massive shift in perspective from that of the ruling scientific (or scientistic) orthodoxy, but it follows from taking life seriously, in accordance with the intuitions to which we are prompted by taking environmental crisis seriously. Here I am indeed offering, as I started by noting that Hobbes did for his time, a rethinking of humanity-in-nature from the bottom up.

Part IV turns to the implications of this world picture for the political philosophy of the environment. It has been widely assumed, since these issues first rose to prominence, that they can and should be addressed within the framework of democratic governance which still largely characterises Northern and Western societies. But a recovered appeal to the creative power of life, as fundamental to the bio-egalitarian intuition which constitutes the essential environmentalist imperative, is not obviously compatible with that framework. Especially is this so when a lost sense of that power has produced the endemic materialist addiction driving both environmental damage and the contemporary failure of democratic polities seriously to address it. I make the case in principle that adequately confronting

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the climate and ecological emergency, once this is recognised as symptomatic of profound civilisational malaise, could require an epistocratic-therapeutic rather than a democratic model for political activity.

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So the book taken as a whole argues that the core of environmental philosophy is metaphysical, not ethical; that properly grasping the metaphysics of the human lifeworld requires of us a newly vital acknowledgement of human creativity as expressing the creative force of life; and that action in the spirit of that acknowledgement could radically (though uncomfortably) transform our politics in the face of unprecedented crisis. On all these counts, I offer what my subtitle claims: a fresh approach to this currently central and literally vital subject.

PART I.
FUNDAMENTALS

❧ Chapter 1 ❧

The Structure of Environmental Issues

Which contemporary developments, situations, changes or challenges fall under the broad heading of *environmental issues*? (Let us avoid from the outset the more standard locution of environmental ‘problems’, with its already built-in assumption that what are to be sought are solutions, more-or-less neat arrangements for making particular difficulties go away one by one – since that characteristically modern approach to things may well not suit the position in which we now actually find ourselves.) When this book started life as a course of lectures, I opened the first by inviting those attending, a group of representatively educated young people, to make suggestions for a preliminary working list of such issues. We can perhaps do no better for a beginning than what they then volunteered.

Unsurprisingly, given its current comparative prominence in the news, the range of concerns proffered initially was that associated directly with climate change – from the observable recent increase in extreme weather events, including heatwaves, ever more violent storms and ever more frequent flooding, to its consequences in the form of wildfires, desertification, droughts, famines, glacier and sea-ice melt and rising sea levels. Equally readily cited were significant reductions in biological diversity, through habitat loss and the destabilisation of ecosystems, due not just to climate change but also to the constant expansion of human demand on available land areas, and accompanied by a rate of species extinction not seen on Earth for 65 million years. Listing these general concerns regarding human impact on the living world also called forth the more specific issues associated with the pasturing, feeding and treatment of livestock, and the whole related question of human dietary habits and their implications for both climate and ecology.

On a separate track, but just as clearly seen as environmental, were concerns about forms of pollution other than carbon emissions – chemicals, radioactivity, plastics and other industrial and household waste (notably sewage) were all instanced – affecting variously the air, the land and particularly the rivers, seas and oceans. And added to this already lengthening list with only a little prompting were then what a long-standing environmentalist would recognise as concerns going back to the 1970s, but still very much alive today: the potential exhaustion of non-renewable

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resources, classically fossil fuels and the mineral bases of heavy industry, but also now the various rare minerals needed for sophisticated electronic applications.

Finally, though again without much by way of prompting, came considerations linking contemporary environmental concern with its nineteenth-century origins: perceived threats to the quality of human life through loss of natural beauty and wildness, and the steady shrinkage of wilderness areas offering a counter to, and an escape from, the urban and megalopolitan civilisation now everywhere encroaching on them.

This is evidently, while not pretending to exhaustiveness, an extensive and diverse catalogue. Just as evidently, its diversity is criss-crossed by a highly complex network of interconnections and feedback loops. For example, one effect of the decline of biodiversity and the associated impoverishment of wild nature is that human beings turn more and more away from the natural world to divert themselves with ever more technology-dependent forms of recreation, which in turn not only generate increased material pollution but also boost carbon emissions contributing to climate change, and thus eventually to further reductions in biodiversity. This is only one of many similar patterns of intensifying linkage between issues which could have been identified separately only for the purpose of an initial list. And here we glimpse a very important second-order feature of the environmental domain: the typically *intractable* character, when considered either together or separately, of each issue caught up in this ramifying complexity. For of course, one common thread of understanding on which all these listed manifestations are tacitly strung is that to be an environmental issue is to be one aspect of what is, overall, an increasingly *critical* situation for humanity.

Hence it is clear that we cannot simply leave things at interlinked multiplicity. Asked for a first offer to impose some organising structure, the same lecture audience came up with a not unexpected set of common drivers: a rapidly increasing global human population, more and more of whom have adopted, or are pressing to adopt, the consumerist lifestyle promoted by Western capitalist economies, with consequently ever-higher demands on material and energy resources. But those conditions, although of course highly relevant, cannot by themselves constitute a sufficient aetiology of the environmental – if only because one could appeal to them equally in explanation of the pandemics of mental distress, or of obesity and other food-related pathologies, which now also afflict the advanced capitalist societies. So let us, in the same quest for structure, try to be more specific. How does this increasingly globalised manner of human living yield the network of

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concerns which we call distinctively environmental, and how in particular does it make the challenges posed by all these various issues so apparently intractable? What concatenates them all into a crisis far more dangerous for humanity than any of the other threats posed by our current way of life?

The framework of crisis

In the first place, we have already noted that all these issues arise because global environmental media (air, water, biosystems) are being put under pressure by human numbers and human activity. There is a general formula due originally to Paul and Anne Ehrlich (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 1990: 58), often touted as capturing the dynamic of this process:

$$I = PCT$$

where P is population, C is level of consumption and T is the environmental intensity of unit consumption – T because this is the Technology variable, a factor declining if we move for instance from fossil-fuel-based to renewables-based technologies for electricity generation. Their product I then stands for total environmental impact. It might well be thought that all this formula does is to give a mathematical veneer to the very simple idea that the more of us there are, going after the more *stuff*, and thereby emitting the more greenhouse gases and drawing on the more natural resources, the more we press on global systems. That is certainly the pattern of relations involved. Actually, however, putting it into equation form does have its uses, to one of which we shall return shortly.

We should now add the vital point that the capacities of these natural systems to absorb and neutralise such impacts without undergoing major step-changes are in the very nature of biological and physical organisation *limited*. Scientific studies have shown with increasing unanimity that these limits are either now well on the way to being breached, or have already been breached, by the levels to which that activity has latterly risen, and by the pressures thereby generated. This is the issue of planetary boundaries, to which again we must soon return.

Secondly, and absolutely crucially for the question of intractability, large-scale derogations from absorptive capacities and pressure on environmental limits arise from the cumulative impacts of *small-scale* impingements by humans on their surroundings. This is especially clear in the case of climate change, where some 80,000 tons of CO₂ equivalent *per minute* are being emitted into the atmosphere across the globe to contribute to the greenhouse effect (see Foster 2022: 19), while each of us individually contributes only a vanishingly small fraction of that eye-

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watering total from our travelling, cooking, space-heating and other activities. But the same pattern appears across the whole range of issues on our preliminary list – my personal contributions to polluting landfill, or to the sewage burden on UK rivers, or to the overcrowding of the National Parks, are tiny and either ecologically or aesthetically negligible, and yet what I contribute to is the accumulation of an increasingly insupportable burden in each instance. This key structural characteristic has, as we shall shortly see, vital implications for our hopes of dealing collectively with the corresponding threats.

Thirdly, and in effect as a corollary of this cumulative character of environmental pressures, almost all the concerns on our list involve a significant *time-lag* – they depend on human activity now building up towards damaging or destructive consequences later. While much adverse experience in the present – of melting permafrost, rising sea levels, droughts, floods, wildfires and zoonotic disease – is already very plausibly attributable to anthropogenic climate destabilisation and ecological impoverishment, all this is still on a comparatively insignificant scale as against what may be coming. It may not be until around 2080 (when, as I pointed out to my lecture audience, they would only be in their hopefully still-vigorous seventies) that humanity as a whole, unless it has meanwhile changed its ways dramatically, will be facing conditions reasonably to be described as catastrophic. By then, however, it is predicted that greenhouse gases in the atmosphere will be up by well over fifty per cent; average atmospheric temperature will be up by between 3 and 6°C above pre-industrial levels; heat-waves, droughts, storms, floods and drinking water scarcity will have become commonplace; and over fifty percent of today's known animal and plant species will have become extinct, while global human population will be at ten billion and still rising. (These data are from OECD 2012, modestly extrapolated.) This feature of the overall situation is also, of course, of fundamental significance for any hopes of dealing with it – since it is just human nature that while the prospect of catastrophe tomorrow can typically be relied on to spur people into action, catastrophe deferred for fifty years will often be contemplated with relative equanimity.

I should perhaps at this point insert what is now known in universities – where, since students became paying customers, their sensibilities have been increasingly carefully protected from possible affront – as a 'content warning': *some readers may find the prospects which I have just outlined to be very scary*. My own version of the warning appropriate here is to emphasise that if you don't find them very scary, you should worry that you aren't paying attention. This is not to

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say that we are all doomed; there is still time to stop the worst of this happening, though no longer, sadly, all of it – but only if people whose future this might be take the sort of urgent, drastic and immediately uncomfortable action which I shall be canvassing in the final part of this book.

And this requirement brings us directly to the fourth characteristic of environmental issues deserving to be called structural, which is that almost all the cumulative impacts just anticipated are in the process of arising from activities which are presently *beneficial*. Humanity is very generally not just burning off fossil fuels and chopping down old-growth forests for the hell of it, but in order to support what we have become used to thinking of as comfortably civilised lifestyles, and also to enable many more people worldwide to access such lifestyles than have historically been able to do so. Nor of course is this simply a matter of increased comfort, but of striking improvements in the conditions for health and at least the material conditions for happiness. Thus in 1800, 43 per cent of children worldwide died before the age of five, while now the figure is four per cent. Until the nineteenth century, average UK life expectancy was thirty to forty years, now it is eighty. Again, global levels of malnutrition have been dramatically reduced, from 35 per cent of people in developing countries in 1970 to thirteen per cent in 2015. As emphasised by Hannah Ritchie, from whose book *Not the End of the World* (Ritchie, 2024) these data come, those are huge gains, which we should neither take for granted nor minimise. Nor, on the other hand, should we minimise the fact that they are coming, largely through the carbon consequences of the relevant developments, at the cost of a habitable planet. This palpably undermines any lasting status as benefits which might be claimed for them, but again, it only does so when they are viewed in the longer term.

In this context it is quite unsurprising that, for many commentators, of whom Ritchie herself is only one of the latest, the characteristic environmental challenge is not to alter the trajectory of climate destabilisation and ecological damage at any cost, but to do so in ways which it is hoped will preserve and build on all these gains. And it is perhaps equally unsurprising, in the light of the other structural features already noted, particularly the relation between present and future, that the besetting temptation to which this approach is exposed is that of wishful thinking: of placing unfounded reliance on the longer-term effectiveness of any and all measures which do not appear to put the short-term benefits in jeopardy. About this mindset, which appears in the policy arena as the dominant ‘sustainable development’ paradigm, we shall have much more to say.

Planetary limits

Before going further, we need to give some attention to the idea of *limits*, which plays a key role in the framework just outlined. This term has different relevant meanings and it is important not to confuse them. To illustrate, consider the kinds of limit there could be on the number of people whom you could get into the room where you presently happen to be. There is firstly the *absolute physical limit*: the number you could pack in to fill every cubic metre from floor to ceiling and wall to wall, such that you simply couldn't squeeze in an additional human body. Well before this absolute limit was reached, however, there would come a point when things became just too claustrophobic to be endured – someone in every seat, someone on everyone's lap, people sitting on all the desks and all over the floor... This would constitute a limit determined by what is *tolerable* or *habitable* for human beings in ordinary circumstances. But of course, and in turn well before the crowding became thus intolerable, we should have reached various *functional limits*. For example, if we suppose the relevant space to be a largeish seminar room, how many people could be accommodated before numbers stopped being viable for a philosophical discussion? If merely every seat in such a room was filled, the interactivity, mutual eye contact and sense of a shared thought-space necessary for that kind of activity would have ceased to be possible.

Now when environmentalists started talking about limits back in the 1970s, especially with the famous *Limits to Growth* report of the Club of Rome in 1974 (Meadows et al. 1972), a lot of emphasis was put on the prospect that global stocks of coal and oil would be drawn on by increased economic activity, driven by population growth, to such an extent that they might in the fairly near future run out, since these non-renewable reserves are clearly subject to absolute physical limits – if used, they will eventually be used up. (The response from people who thought, or hoped, that economic growth could be in practice unlimited was that as these physical limits were approached, human ingenuity would be stimulated to invent or upscale alternative energy sources – as has to some extent happened with renewables, but is equally evidently subject to the law of diminishing returns.) There was also, in relation to the population explosion, some concern that limits of tolerability might be breached – that some non-urban settings, and in particular wilderness areas, might lose their essential character through the incursion of simply too many people. But more recently it has been clearly recognised that the *crucial* environmental limits are the function-relative ones illustrated in that little thought-experiment: the finite capacities of ecological systems to absorb

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pressures and perturbations without being driven across thresholds at which they are triggered to shift into system-states incompatible with the various established functionalities of civilisation.

These limits are built into ecological systems by the way such systems tend in natural conditions to obey what Barry Commoner identified in *The Closing Circle* (1972) as the Laws of Ecology. The first three of these laws as he formulated them are:

- *Everything is connected to everything else* – that is, as we have already noted, the ecosphere is a highly complex integrated system comprising living organisms, species and their physico-chemical surroundings.
- *Everything must go somewhere* – in nature there is no such thing as ‘waste’, and what is discarded by one process is always taken up and ‘recycled’ by another, so that overall
- *Nature knows best* – natural systems have evolved in mutual adjustment the balance of which has emerged from fine-tuning over millennia.

As a simplified illustration of how these laws operate, consider the lynx-rabbit ecology which Commoner himself describes. A population of lynxes and one of rabbits occupy a certain territory to which we are to suppose them both confined (we can perhaps imagine it as an island where these two species dominate), and the lynxes depend for their main food source on eating the rabbits. When rabbits abound and the lynxes are correspondingly well-fed, they develop into such effective hunters that the rabbit population gradually becomes straitened and its birth rate starts to decline. As rabbits become scarcer, the lynxes go increasingly hungry (let us also assume that mice and similar snacks are unavailable in sufficient quantities to make up the deficit), until the more feeble among them begin to fall by the wayside. Left more and more to their own devices by this predatory remission, the rabbits get on with doing less interruptedly what rabbits do, and their numbers therefore climb again, eventually to the point where even the most languid and enervated lynx can hope to catch a few of them. The lynxes thus rebuild their strength and hunting capacity, and the whole cycle goes round once again – every ten-years, according to the Canadian fur-trapping records which Commoner cites (1972: 35). The two populations can here be seen to comprise jointly a self-limiting and self-balancing ecological system.

The key point here is that human interventions in such natural systems always tend to be linear rather than cyclical, because humans are characteristically always

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trying to *maximise* something – a process generally productive of unanticipated consequences and liable over time to push systems beyond their limits of stability and resilience. (In Commoner's example, by contrast, maximising tendencies are self-correcting – more lynxes mean fewer rabbits which means fewer lynxes which means more rabbits which means more lynxes, and so on round.) But suppose that trappers start taking out the lynxes indiscriminately to maximise fur-trade profits; the result will be a rabbit-explosion which in turn might denude the area of rabbit fodder and produce a cascading ecological crash. This is of course a very diagrammatic illustration of one possible intervention, but in reality human activities in pursuit of maximising economic growth and its material benefits are now destabilising structurally crucial natural systems across the planet in essentially this kind of way. The process affects principally

- The climate (through the effects of atmospheric CO₂);
- Biodiversity (through increasing rates of species loss);
- The nitrogen and phosphorus cycles (through increasing load of these chemicals on environmental media);
- Other forms of chemical pollution (increasingly introduced into natural systems)
- The oceans (through increasing acidity, principally from atmospheric carbon but also from the effects of warming);
- The stratosphere (through ozone depletion);
- Global freshwater (through increasing run-off for agriculture);
- Land use (through the increasing extent of cropland as against forested areas); and
- Atmospheric aerosols (increased particulate loading).
(from Rockstrom et al. 2009)

Now if we recur for a moment to our initial example of the different kinds of limit on numbers of people in a room, there is a further important feature of the third or functional kind (which is the kind at stake in all the above). This is that we can always identify two related numerical points: a *boundary* (an upper limit set on the numbers which we know can safely be admitted if the relevant function is to be preserved – say about fifteen for a profitable seminar discussion), and beyond that

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a *threshold* (maybe somewhere between fifteen and twenty) which once crossed would make such discussion simply unviable. The point is that, since we may not know at exactly what number the threshold will be reached (and it is always dangerously easy to say ‘Oh go on, *one* more won’t hurt’), we establish and ideally stick to our boundary number in order to maintain the elbow-room or *safe space* within which we know discussion *can* operate. This feature transfers directly to the case of planetary limits. Thus, most obviously, we know that beyond the threshold of say 4–5°C of additional global warming, the global climate is likely to shift to conditions which have not obtained since long before humans were around, and with which the infrastructure of normal civilisation (providing us with all the amenities like law enforcement and food distribution and healthcare which we have come to take for granted), would be quite incapable of coping. That is why we are – at least notionally, though nowhere in effective practice – aiming not to cross the ‘safe space’ *boundary* of 1.5°C beyond which runaway warming would be triggered and could take us inexorably across that threshold. The dimensions and urgency of environmental crisis come starkly into view when we recognise that, as early as 2009, it had been established by robust interdisciplinary scientific research that, in the first three cases of planetary limits listed above, safe space boundaries understood in these terms had *already* been crossed and dangerous thresholds were thus in prospect of being breached, with pressure still building in all the other areas (Rockstrom et al. 2009).

So to summarise this section together with the previous one:

- planetary-scale impacts build up from small-scale impingements of human activity;
- present such activity has detrimental future (medium- to longer-term) consequences;
- activity which is often beneficial in the present cumulatively contributes to longer term climate and ecological damage; and crucially,
- limits to the capacities of planetary systems to absorb this damage without grievous civilisational consequences are rapidly being approached, and in some cases have already been breached, by human activity.

This summary structural account of environmental crisis throws into sharp relief the crunch question of how we are at present addressing that crisis. Why, it seems

very obvious to ask, are we not going all-out to avoid the catastrophic outcomes which this whole conjuncture threatens, while there is still time to do so?

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To grasp the full import of this question, we should consider what ‘going all-out’ could mean here. Some optimists like Ritchie, whom I cited earlier, think that we are already going all-out, by devoting much scientific expertise and investment to finding technological solutions – nuclear and renewables instead of fossil fuels, plant-based meat substitutes, genetic engineering to improve crop yields from reduced land areas, and so on. But how plausible is it to hope that a set of technical fixes will allow us to escape the need for major lifestyle change? Here it is useful to recall the ‘Ehrlich equation’ which I introduced earlier:

$$I = PCT$$

where I is total environmental impact, P is level of population, C is per capita consumption, and T (the technology variable) stands for the environmental intensity of consumption. This equation, as noted, formalises the essential structure of the environmental crisis: it says that the more of us there are, consuming the more biospheric resources to produce, distribute and eventually dispose of our material goods, the worse the ecological overload gets. It can easily be manipulated, however, to emphasise what would actually be involved in reducing environmental impact by fifty per cent over a fifty-year period – say, by 2074. Assuming a world population increase of around two billion, or a quarter again on top of present numbers (probably an underestimate) and an economic growth rate of two to three per cent (modest in conventional terms, but actually yielding a quadrupling of notional per capita consumption over fifty years), simple arithmetic shows that meeting the target of reducing impact by fifty per cent would require the environmental intensity of production T to decline by a factor of about ten ($I/2 = 1.25P \times 4C \times T/10$) or, in other words, the environmental efficiency of unit production to rise by some ninety per cent over this fifty-year period. This point was first made, with slightly different figures for the assumption, by the environmental economist Paul Ekins (1993). While some genuine technical progress has indeed been made in various relevant areas, this order of target looks simply unachievable, whether one is considering its technical or (in democratic conditions) its political feasibility. At the very best, even the most committed techno-optimist would surely have to concede that total reliance on achieving it to save ourselves from catastrophe would be a dangerously unprecautionary strategy. As the former Sustainable Development

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Commission observed in an authoritative report on this matter, ‘the overwhelming consensus amongst academics, think-tanks and NGOs is that resource productivity will not, *on its own*, deliver the desired reconciliation between the pursuit of economic growth and the non-negotiable imperative of learning to live within the Earth’s biophysical constraints’. (Sustainable Development Commission 2003).

But since continued world population growth (aided by improvements in child health and nutrition) seems to be a given, any real commitment to decoupling current production and consumption patterns from environmental degradation must therefore involve effective intervention in the value of the *consumption* variable *C*. That can only mean the vast majority of people, in the West at any rate, consuming *less* – with very significant changes in what have become settled expectations in relation to labour-saving, heating, mobility, diet and a whole lot else. And of course, nothing remotely like this is presently on the cards. Surveys, such as that by the Office for National Statistics (2022) on ‘Worries about climate change’, show a majority to be notionally concerned, but still only a small minority willing (or even just willing to tell interviewers that they are willing) to make serious consequential lifestyle changes. Nor is this anything other than what one would expect from people’s recognition that their situation is structured, as we have set out, both by the environmental insignificance of their own personal consumption, and by the fact that what they would have to reduce this consumption very sharply in a bid to avoid is a prospect not for the present but for the medium- to longer-term future.

We are caught up here, that is to say, in a classic case of the form which has been identified as a collective action problem – although I prefer, for the reasons given at the outset of this chapter, to use the term *collective action dilemma*. Another name for what is involved was proposed by the American ecologist and biologist Garrett Hardin in a famous and still very relevant paper (Hardin 1968), when issues of pollution and endangered species, though not yet of climate change, were just beginning to be recognised: the Tragedy of the Commons. This label, though it has been criticised as both strident and question-begging, should give us pause. For suppose what confronts us here is indeed a form of *tragedy*. Unlike problems, tragedies, whether literary or real, don’t have ‘solutions’ – they have upshots which can only be reached through painful and sometimes terrible upheavals in people’s lives, and we should be wary of adopting any terminology which of itself rules this possibility out.

Hardin’s paper presents a simple thought-experiment to exhibit the dynamics of the type-situation which he is discussing – one where a particular resource (a

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common-pool resource, as it was later termed) is not owned by any individual but is held in common by a group, all of whom however draw ongoing benefits from it individually. He imagines a community of herdsmen (not yet, back in 1968, herdspersons) who all pasture their beasts on a tract of common land. This land will have a certain carrying capacity – a certain number of beasts which it can support and enable to flourish while itself remaining in good condition, and for this capacity not to be exceeded, each herdsman must pasture only as many beasts as will in total make up that number and no more. While the community remains small and the total stock pastured correspondingly restricted there is no difficulty but, as numbers increase, this issue of keeping within the carrying capacity becomes real. For now, consider the incentive which each herdsman has in this situation to add one more beast to his personal complement. The full profit from this addition will accrue to him, but if it results in pushing the total number of beasts pastured beyond the carrying capacity, any costs of this in terms of degrading the common resource will fall on the whole community of users, so that only a fraction will need to be borne by him. And clearly this calculation is of its nature iterative, since his adding just one more beast will not materially alter the conditions in which his original incentive arose, so that it will remain operative. In this situation, as Hardin puts it (1968: 1244):

the rational herdsman concludes that the only sensible course for him to pursue is to add another animal to his herd. And another; and another ... But this is the conclusion reached by each and every rational herdsman sharing a common. Therein is the tragedy. Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit – in a world that is limited.

The situation has the structure of what is known in game theory as the Prisoners' Dilemma, on which there is an extensive literature, best avoided by non-economists – the philosopher John Mackie has however an interesting brief discussion of it in his book on ethics (Mackie 1977). But even without any very ambitious formalism we can easily see that each herdsman is confronted by four options which he will rationally evaluate thus:

- If I add a beast and others don't, I will benefit by free-riding on the resource maintained by their abstinence.
- If I do and others do also, I will bear only a fraction of the ensuing shared cost as the resource degrades – and in any case, my abstaining would not have averted this cost.

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- If I don't add a beast and others do, I'm being taken for a sucker – I am sacrificing my own interests to preserve a common good about which no-one else is bothering.
- If I don't and others don't either, I'm missing the opportunity to free-ride with which I came in.

This tabulation makes it evident that, from the perspective of the rational pursuit of one's own interest, adding a beast yields a positive value in both cases and refraining from doing so a negative one. (As this has been technically put, defecting dominates co-operation whatever others do.) But so it does also, of course, for all those others considering their own options – and thus, exceeding the carrying capacity seemingly becomes inevitable. Hence Hardin's conclusion:

Ruin is the destiny toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest...Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all. (ibid.)

It is the application of this thought-experiment to global environmental dilemmas which has given the paper and its conclusion an enduring influence. For the planetary environmental media (air, water, totality of land as biosphere) can also readily be seen as common-pool resources, owned neither by individuals nor by particular groups but held in common by all humanity; and in relation to them too, as Dale Jamieson has expressed it, 'each of us acting on our own desires contribute to outcomes that we neither desire nor intend' (Jamieson 2014: 4). Hardin seems to have captured exactly the structure of the general incentive which we registered above: the incentive to go on consuming at, or in aspiration towards, Western levels of demand, even while the destruction towards which such behaviour is taking us all is recognised to be ruinous, and indeed ultimately catastrophic.

Indeed, his demonstration is arguably much more cogent in this broader environmental context than for the sort of common-pool resources in terms of which it was first presented. As an account of the real-life challenges of managing that kind of resource, for instance as these challenges were confronted and dealt with in England before the commons were largely enclosed, his invocation of inexorable tragedy has been criticised for overlooking, as the Marxist historian E.P. Thompson (1991: 107) put it,

that the commoners themselves were not without common sense. Over time and over space the users of commons have developed a rich variety of institutions and community sanctions which have effected restraints and stints upon use.

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And Elinor Ostrom (1990) subsequently showed, in a *tour de force* of institutional economics which won the Nobel Prize, that, in more-or-less small-scale situations (corresponding to that of Hardin's imagined herdsmen, but drawn by her from empirical case studies), where sharers of a common-pool resource can readily communicate, share social and moral norms on which mutual trust can be based, and can operate flexible local systems to monitor compliance and sanction infractions, such ordinary commonsense often enables arrangements which reliably preserve both the shared resource and the flow of benefits to individual users. Many commentators have rejoiced in what they take to be this refutation of Hardin's theory, especially since they have tended to find the ways to avoid tragedy which he himself canvasses – privatisation of the commons or 'mutual coercion mutually agreed' – to be either ideologically unattractive or uncomfortably authoritarian, or both. But in fact Ostrom specifically admits that in contrast to the kind of case which she herself studies, models like Hardin's

are useful for predicting behaviour in large scale CPRs [common-pool resources] in which no-one communicates, everyone acts independently, no attention is paid to the effects of one's actions and the costs of trying to change the structure of the situation are high. (Ostrom 1990: 183)

And these, of course, are exactly the conditions under which we do confront the 'common-pool' status of the global environment.

Someone might object that neither non-communication nor independent action in fact applies in these global cases: surely it is only when acting in droves that we emit or pollute significantly, and have we not been talking almost incessantly about environmental issues for at least a couple of decades? But what Ostrom means by *communication* in this context is the sort of face-to-face interaction around acceptable and unacceptable behaviours characteristic of the cases of successful commons management which she identifies, and this is just what the broader environmental situation precludes. Because my environmental impacts bear on everyone, they bear on no-one in particular, and so there is no-one in particular with whom I need or am obliged to negotiate them. (By the same token, I do not have the same locus to object to my neighbour's casually unnecessary carbon emissions as I have to object to his casually intrusive security light or his yelping dogs.) Our individual contributions to overstressing the various global commons are fundamentally *anonymous*. Equally, while anonymous, they remain individual: while it is only our action in droves that amounts to environmental damage, the choice as to whether or not to go with the flow (shall I free-ride with just this one

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pressingly attractive long-haul flight?) always comes back to the individual as an independent actor. At this level, therefore, Hardin's analysis of the tragic drive to despoilate common resources seems to remain fully applicable.

So too, importantly, does the extension of that analysis to second- and higher-order incentives. For the same characteristics of independent anonymity in our actions are what will incentivise us to at best only partial compliance with any rules for environmental good behaviour which do manage to get established at the communal level. (If everyone has to sort their rubbish for recycling, I can free-ride by sometimes not bothering – but so can everyone else, so the rule tends to become ineffectual.) And these considerations apply equally clearly at the level of corporate and state actors as much as that of individuals. As Jamieson comments (2014: 99) on the logic of climate mitigation:

High-emitting rich countries do not want developing countries to follow in their footsteps, but developing countries want rich countries to take the first steps in reducing emissions ... among the rich countries there is a 'you first, then me' attitude.

For it is of course inherent in Hardin's logic, not just that each player has an incentive to defect, but that no-one has any incentive *not* to defect until they can see everyone else similarly (and sufficiently irreversibly) declining to do so. The essential history of all those international conferences on the climate and ecological crisis is given in that sad corollary.

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The tragedy of the global commons, as it has been outlined, arises for self-interested rational actors, each considering individually what behaviours in relation to various shared resources will be most prudentially beneficial for him- or herself. But that is only one tendentious model of what human beings are really like (albeit one much favoured by economists as a basis for claiming that theirs is a mathematically respectable discipline). It is because people in ordinary life are essentially more than this – because they also characteristically govern their actions by moral norms embodying attention to the interests of others as well as their own – that the tragic bind can be escaped in suitably-managed common-pool resource contexts involving face-to-face community interaction. So it is natural to wonder whether a corresponding moral constraint on self-interested behaviour could not be recognised in our dealings with the global environmental commons, such as

might overcome the inherent structural tendency of those dealings to configure us as anonymously independent individual agents. Don't we have moral obligations here too – as, for instance, not to pollute or overload shared environmental media, however anonymous and undetectable our individual contributions might be? Isn't it indeed the case that, as the admirably uncompromising Greta Thunberg says in relation specifically to our climate responsibilities, 'the bigger your carbon footprint – the bigger your moral duty'? (Thunberg 2019: 24) Isn't there an issue of conscience here as well as of prudential incentive?

Hardin is rather briskly dismissive of the appeal to conscience. He sees the person who refrains on conscientious grounds from defecting as merely making it easier for those not so inhibited to free-ride on the common resource. Indeed he argues in Darwinian vein that conscientious abstention can even become self-eliminating, as in the population case which is one principal concern of his paper: those whose sense of social responsibility in an overpopulated world limits them to having only one or two children will simply be outbred over the course of a few generations by those who not only lack any such sense but pass on that attitude of insouciance to their own more numerous offspring. And there are other examples which have *prima facie* the same form. If for instance I conscientiously refrain from recreational flying (a major contributor to carbon emissions), I leave the seats which I might have occupied free for people who aren't bothered. To the extent that others similarly abstain, the proportion of *Daily Mail* readers on planes simply increases, and so correspondingly does demand for yet more planes – and the idea which I have more than once encountered when introducing these issues to schoolchildren, that flying is a human right, is bred into more and more of the rising generation.

This account, if it were persuasive, would make things like the recent Swedish-inspired *flygskam* or 'flight-shaming' movement peculiarly pointless. It might be felt, however, that what is overlooked here – just as the diagnosis of inexorable ruin overlooks the role of shared behavioural norms in real life – is the genuine power of example. If people, especially those in the public eye, conspicuously cease to fly on grounds of conscience, the effect could just as readily be to make others think twice as to clear the field for the conscienceless to predominate. Certainly *flygskam* had a measurable if small effect, at least initially and in Sweden,¹ in reducing numbers of

1. See for instance <https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/flygskam-anti-flying-flight-shaming-sweden-greta-thornberg-environment-air-travel-train-brag-tagskryt-a8945196.html> (accessed May 2025)

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flights taken and correspondingly increasing rail usage – though the jury probably remains out on whether this effect can be generalised as the climate crisis worsens and full recognition of it becomes more widespread.

But there is a deeper difficulty in the way of appealing thus to conscience for an escape from global-environmental collective action dilemmas – a difficulty that deserves to feature as the last of the broad structural features of environmental issues considered in this chapter. This is the difficulty that to have a usefully uneasy conscience about your carbon footprint, you first need to have a carbon footprint – and none of us actually does.

The carbon footprint of an entity or an activity, as standardly defined, is the amount of greenhouse gas, in *CO₂ equivalent*, emitted by that entity or activity. (CO₂ equivalent means the total of all the various greenhouse gases caused directly or indirectly by an activity – methane and so on as well as carbon dioxide, all of which have shorter or longer effective lives in the atmosphere – expressed in terms of the amount of CO₂ which would have the same effects over a given period.) Of course, concentrating on this as a measure of impact means we are only talking about damage caused through the global warming which is the consequence of increased atmospheric CO₂, but since this is now the major factor in a whole range of ecosystem derangements and species extinctions, it can be taken as a good proxy for the way we do environmental damage generally. By an *entity* can be meant anything from an individual to a corporation to a country or even to the whole world, and by an *activity* anything from brushing your teeth to an entire lifestyle. The point of the concept, then, is that even at the more mundane end of this range there are always carbon consequences. This is helpfully clear from a cheerful little book by Mike Berners-Lee, *How Bad Are Bananas?* (Berners-Lee 2010), which tells you what the CO₂ equivalent generated by each of a wide range of more and less ordinary activities, from sending a text via eating a banana and visiting your Granny in Glasgow to taking a trip on the space shuttle, actually comes to – as far as can be estimated by methodologies which are reasonably reliable at least as far as concerns the orders of magnitude involved.

Now it is unarguable that almost everything we do has carbon, or CO₂ equivalent, consequences – it all directly or indirectly contributes to putting greenhouse gases up into the atmosphere and so to global warming. But the idea of a carbon *footprint* claims more than this, for it is that of an impression created by a footfall in some receptive medium (like sand, or snow). And this pictures your personal daily, or annual, total of emitted CO₂ equivalent as having some specific

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identifiable effect, leaving some actual mark on something, doing its own particular little bit of *squashing down* or damage. (Somewhere in the background seems to be the analogy of someone carelessly trampling through a wildflower meadow, or similar.) But that implication carried by the metaphor is quite unwarranted. That is simply not how global warming works: your individual carbon contribution, and even that of some sleek billionaire on his super-yacht, not only cannot be causally linked to any specific bit of future environmental damage but is in itself completely inert as far as affecting global temperature goes, *until* it is combined with those of vastly many others.

What is misrepresented in the footprint image, in other words, is the nature of responsibility here. Your *literal* footprint matches the size of your actual foot, and you are clearly responsible for damaging whatever gets trampled under it as you stomp blithely along: also, the larger your foot, the more things you will trample down in the particular places where you tread. But, in the carbon case, things only get ‘squashed underfoot’ when billions of ‘feet’ are in play, and even then nothing is squashed under any particular one of those feet. My carbon foot on its own, even the ‘foot’ constituted by a whole lifetime’s carbon emissions, doesn’t just press down very lightly indeed – by itself it is always, as it were, treading on air. And this is also true of any collective (such as Britain, or even the US) whose combined emissions could not *by themselves* trigger climatic alteration. Again, in the nature of the case, no particular global-heating consequence such as an Australian bush-fire is ever caused by British or US emissions, any more than the seawater used to extinguish it could be traced back to British rain. Only a collective large enough for its combined emissions to warm the world – that is, something in the order of the entire Western industrialised world and its latter-day imitators taken together – has a ‘carbon footprint’ in the sense which the metaphor tries illegitimately to generalise to everybody’s carbon-consequential activities.

The same, it should be noted, largely goes for the ‘ecological footprint’ idea from which the carbon version is borrowed. I could spend a lifetime chopping down trees and not achieve any deforestation, conceived as a process impacting the biosphere as a whole. Again, it really takes a civilisation to have the kind of ecological footprint by which global systems are threatened.

So although a book like Berners-Lee’s and the various calculators of one’s ecological footprint to be found online can usefully give a sense of how far the carbon or natural resource *commitment* going with one’s personal lifestyle extends, the ‘footprint’ metaphor gives no support to, but rather just assumes illicitly, the

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idea that we are each in our present individual activities doing climate or ecological damage. This being so, the template of individual conscience is not a comfortable fit here. Conscience should inhibit my hurting you for fun, irrespective of how many other people might be lining up behind me to have a go at you as well. But there is no equivalent inhibition on belching out carbon at even several thousand times my present rate, because the potential of that activity to contribute to harm depends entirely on what everyone else is doing along similar lines. I might indeed resist following a multitude to do evil, as the Bible commands (Exodus 23, v.2) – but what this prohibits is letting myself be incited by a group's example to do evil on my own account. Participating in actions which only become evil if the multitude is multitudinous enough seems not to be covered.

These considerations, unwelcome as they will be to activists and others who have accepted the footprint metaphor unthinkingly, chime with the reasons already noted for why Hardin's analysis remains persistently relevant to global environmental issues. In small-scale face-to-face conditions where a common-pool resource is in danger of being degraded, there can often be a sufficiently evident causal link between free-riding by individual users and visible such degradation for community-accepted norms to come to bear with genuinely inhibiting force on each individual so tempted. In regard to free-riding on global climate or ecological stability, such force is simply absent – the footprint model has appealed because, accepted unreflectively, it creates a misleading appearance of it. (Others have discussed its potential for promoting environmental guilt in individuals, in order to let corporations and fossil-fuel states off the hook – see Maniates 2002; Supran and Oreskes 2021). But then, once the appearance has been recognised as misleading or the motivation as corrupt, why should the individual not allow prudential concerns to guide conduct after all? If I will make no actual difference except to my own schedule by refusing to take that convenient flight, why not take it?

There must be an answer to this question if we are to have any hope of averting climate and ecological catastrophe, and it is still hard to shrug off the feeling that it must involve some crucial role for norms and standards of conscience. We pick up this intuition and some of the main ways in which it has been pursued, in Part II of the book.

Meanwhile we can conclude this chapter by summarising the broadly structural reasons for our facing a climate and ecological emergency. The challenges with which environmental issues confront us are highly dangerous: the viability of civilised human life, and maybe planetary habitability, are at stake

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if we remain on a trajectory to breach planetary boundaries and then limits. All this is now completely uncontroversial among the relevantly informed. But these challenges are also hugely recalcitrant to agreed common action, because of the tragic pervasiveness of the collective action dilemma structure. And of course this recalcitrance is constantly traded on by vested interests like the fossil fuel lobby and big capitalist corporations who are exploiting people very satisfactorily under present arrangements and have no incentive to change them – a situation only exacerbated by political cowardice and inertia in democratic conditions. The result is that protection regimes for ecosystems, for biodiversity and for climate stability are characteristically inadequate, weakly applied and routinely flouted, while time is rapidly running out to make them less so.

All this suggests that the real crunch question we face is: how, in these circumstances, can we make present recognition of the planetary limits, which are already closing in, but which are still going to bite viciously only in the future, more than just a matter of lip-service and at best baby steps in some of the right directions? How can we make those limits effective as strong restraints on present activities and incentives to change these activities significantly? Or, putting this another way: what kind of present constraint and incentive in relation to presently damaging human activities, operative worldwide on a now massively damaging scale, could effectively go proxy for the future kicking-in of the natural limits which these activities threaten to breach?

This is the question with which the whole book will be in one way or another engaged.

❧ Chapter 2 ❧

Humans and Nature

The previous chapter considered the structural characteristics that environmental issues share, and noted that prominent among them was rapidly increasing pressure on the biosphere's resources from growing human numbers combined with rising expectations regarding the material aspects of lifestyle. It ended with asking how we might put those expectations under effective constraint in the context of worldwide collective action dilemma. Before turning directly to that question, however, we must be prepared (in a proper spirit of philosophical enquiry into fundamentals) to step yet further back from the immediacy of these various concerns, and examine two central concepts we have so far taken for granted. These are the concepts of *environment* itself, and of the *resources* which it supplies to human activity.

The word *environment* comes from the French *environner*, which means 'to surround' – the corresponding German word is *die Umwelt*, which translates literally as 'the around-world'. But the idea of *surrounding* entails something which is surrounded, that is, something which is for this purpose central. (The lawn, for example, doesn't surround anything until one places the sundial or similar upon it, not necessarily of course in its exact geometrical centre.) So the natural environment has to be thought of as naturally surrounding *something*, and when we think of it after the manner of Chapter 1, clearly what it is being thought of as surrounding is us – that is, human beings. The concept of environment is thus essentially, as we say, *anthropocentric*: it builds in humans as central to the natural world considered as providing a stage and setting for their activities.

This might seem to go without saying, but actually it involves a set of implications which the concept of the *biosphere*, by contrast – the arena of ecological interconnectedness shared by all life – does not carry. Taking it for granted that our concerns are 'environmental' in this sense may therefore preclude our asking questions about those implications which we ought to raise. Is it contributory to, and even perhaps significantly constitutive of, the difficulties and challenges set out in the last chapter that we think of the natural world so readily from this perspective of human centrality and in this light? And, if so, what other perspective might we intelligibly adopt towards that world, when it is our activity within it which is under consideration? These questions will become important when we come to

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explore the resort to morality – essentially a kind of thinking which tries *not* to put oneself at the centre – and particularly when this resort is taken to operationalise a putatively ‘biocentric’ rather than an anthropocentric perspective.

Natural resources

Meanwhile, it is no accident that the ‘environmental’ turn of the last half-century, insofar as it has come to inform official thinking in government ministries, agencies and those who deal with them, has gone with a *resource management* approach to nature. The idea that the natural world out there surrounding us can be seen and treated as a stock of resources available to be exploited for human benefit is obviously a relatedly anthropocentric notion. This way of thinking, and this connection, go culturally very deep – in the culture of the North and West of the world, at least. The American historian Lynn White published decades ago a paper which has remained as famous as Hardin’s, in which he wrote that:

especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen ... Man shares, in great measure, God’s transcendence of nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism ... not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.

He further noted that our science and technology have grown out of these Christian attitudes towards man’s relation to nature, which have persisted into a post-Christian era, and drew the conclusion that ‘we shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man’. (White 1967: 1205, 1207) One may indeed reasonably doubt whether Christianity on its own deserves quite this degree of blame for our present plight – the environmental philosopher Robin Attfield, for instance, considers that faith to be committed to ‘an ethic of responsible care and stewardship of the natural world’ (2001: 96). But stewardship still means the careful use of resources which that world is thought of as affording to humanity, with humanity considered in this whole cultural tradition as the central locus of spirit, purpose and value on Earth.

But let us now ask, as we did with environment, what the concept of a *resource* involves and implies. What does it mean to say that something is a resource? In the first place, it has to be a resource *for* someone or something – nothing can be a resource just in and by itself. The young Earth before life evolved had a substantial material existence, but it was not yet a set of resources. On the account of Genesis,

Natural resources

however, Nature *is* a resource, because it was originally put there by God with His subsequent creation of humans in view. Secondly, a resource has to be something which that someone can use for some purpose of theirs (as man uses nature ‘for his proper ends’, in White’s terminology). Nothing becomes a resource, in other words, until it serves or feasibly could serve the turn of some agent wanting or needing to make some use of it. Thirdly, and as a crucial corollary, a resource has to be something, the use of which makes or could make some agent *better off*, at least in respect of pursuing some particular purpose, than they would have been otherwise. So if I want to get rid of rats, rat-poison is a resource, and if I want to commit suicide it is also a resource, albeit not a very effective one; but if I want to go fishing, a poisoned river in which all the fish have been killed off by chemical effluent is not a resource, since it defeats rather than serves my purpose (though it may retain the potential to become a resource once again if it were to be cleaned up).

These are, once again, fairly elementary observations. But they lead us towards a point of fundamental significance for understanding the relation between humans and (the rest of) nature which is the subject of this chapter. For if we focus on the third of those requirements – using a resource makes you better off than you would have been otherwise, that is, you would have been *worse off* without it – we can see built into it the assumption that, while the benefit in question depends on the availability and therefore on the existence of the resource, your existence as recipient of the benefit does not so depend. For, if it did, you could not have been worse off without the resource, since, without it, you would not have *been* at all. In logical terms, this is to say that a resource must be something to which you are *externally related*, where that means it could change without you changing, or have been different without your having been different. So, for example, you are externally related to your phone, however much you may dote on that particular kind of phone, but not to your parents – your genetic relation to them is an *internal relation*, one a change in which would have meant *you* being a different individual person. Again, the cardinal numbers stand in internal relations to one another – if four were not twice two, it would not be the number it is – but you and the copy of this book now in front of you are externally related, since both it and you would have been the same existents if you were not now reading it and indeed had never come across it.¹

1. That is of course why reading it can indeed make you better off, as hopefully it is already doing.

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But now a deep tension can be seen within the conception of the natural world as a set of resources for humanity – even if we no longer take it to be provided as such by a benevolent Deity. Human beings, we now know in great detail, are for all their unique Anthropocenic pull on their surroundings an evolved species of primate. Their existence thus clearly *does* depend on that of the natural world in general, and directly on the life-supporting aspects of that world, including fresh water, fertile soils, endurable temperatures, and other species in a variety of ways (such as food, clothing and help in hunting). How then can these things, to which we seem to be internally related – without them we should not have been, and without their particular configuration should have been radically different creatures – have come to stand as resources for humanity, that is, as things to which we must by definition be externally related? My individual existence, of course, does not depend on that of some particular river which I may use for fresh water or for fishing, so at that level the resource model works. But the existence, both emergent and continuing, of humans *as a species* does depend on that of, for instance, a functioning hydrological cycle, and here the external relations model seems to break down. And yet it is at this general level, where humanity as a whole is related to the natural world as a whole interlocking biosystem, that the environmental picture of a set of resource management challenges seeks to operate.

The resource model can only work at that global level, that is, to the extent that we have come to take human existence as a kind of *given* – to think of ourselves as, although naturally emergent, naturally formed and naturally dependent, also essentially apart from and over against the rest of the natural world. And with this reflection, we are pushed yet further back, to an examination of the concept of Nature itself.

Mill on Nature

An incisive and still-classic such analysis is that by the great English utilitarian John Stuart Mill in his essay ‘On Nature’, first published in 1874. Mill identifies two principal meanings of *Nature*, and associatedly of the adjective *natural*. Nature, he points out, can mean:

the aggregate of the powers and properties of all things ... the sum of all phenomena, together with the causes which produce them; including not only all that happens, but all that is capable of happening ... all the powers existing in either the outer or the inner world and everything which takes place by means of those powers”.

Mill on Nature

This is the sense in which we talk of the observed regularities governing the physical world as Laws of Nature, which of course apply to us too. It is, says Mill, one correct definition, but only one, since the term *Nature* is actually ambiguous. We also familiarly use it in a sense in which we oppose Nature to Art and the natural to the artificial – although in ‘the true scientific sense, Art is as much Nature as anything else’, and constitutes only ‘the employment of the powers of Nature for an end’. In this second sense, Nature means

not everything which happens, but only what takes place without the agency, or without the voluntary and intentional agency, of man. (Mill 1874: 8–10)

Now clearly, in respect of these two distinct modes of speaking, whether or not something is *natural* depends on the light in which it is being considered. So, for example, in the first sense all fire is a natural occurrence, because it all happens through combustion which is one of the powers inherent in nature – but in the second sense, fire kindled by humans, say for cooking, is *not* a natural occurrence, because it is product of human intention. Equally, in the first sense, people going fishing is a natural occurrence, just like breathing and walking and everything else they do, but in the second sense it is not – it is an exercise of ‘voluntary and intentional agency’, something that wouldn’t happen ‘naturally’ (fish attaching themselves to hooks attached to lengths of string) but only does so because humans choose to make it happen. And it is evidently only in the second sense, where Nature is defined as something over against the activities of human beings considered as conscious agents of choice and will, that its various manifestations and affordances can be seen as potentially resources – as things which we can choose to use to make ourselves better off than we, existing as agents of will and intention apart from our *natural* context, would have been otherwise.

Why do these distinctions matter? One reason, and Mill’s principal interest in his essay, is that we use *natural* not just descriptively, but also as a term of approbation, and correspondingly, *unnatural* as a form of condemnation. This usage must draw on the second descriptive sense of the term, in which it refers to the spontaneous course of unwilled occurrences as contrasted with the courses taken by intentional human activity, because it involves offering what is described as natural in this sense as providing a guide or standard for human activity to follow – and nothing can be followed which is not separate and distinct from that which does the following. (As Mill points out, one can neither follow nor, therefore, fail to follow nature in his first sense, wherein everything which we do and choose is equally an expression of natural ‘powers and properties’.) Thus we have a tendency in these

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days of oppressively complex technological civilisation to think approvingly, at least in selected contexts, of what happens with the least amount of deliberate human input, as when we commend organically-grown food as more ‘natural’ than that produced with chemical fertilisers. Similarly, ‘natural childbirth’ can be preferred to that dependent on technologically-supported medical intervention – although how far the latter is rejected as unnatural may well turn on how far it is needed in a particular case of life-threatening danger to woman or baby, which it is also perfectly *natural* for sentient creatures to want to avoid.

As this last case suggests, equivocations and slippages between Mill’s two principal senses of the terms are rife within our often controversial and contested evaluative practice with these concepts. In another example, homosexual activity, long condemned as unnatural because involving a seemingly wilful perversion of the organs of generation from their ‘naturally-intended’ employment, has latterly come to be seen as merely one natural manifestation among others of human sexuality, as the practice has become for various reasons more socially acceptable. Here a slide from the second sense of natural to the first, while nevertheless tacitly retaining the commendatory vibration, is clearly doing the legitimising work. But while subtleties of this kind can set traps for the unwary, they do not seem beyond our casuistical ingenuity to negotiate, as long as we bear the significant ambiguities of the central terms firmly in mind.

Where we may find this ambiguity harder to deal with, however, is in thinking not about human relations with other humans, but about the situation of the human species generally in relation to the non-human, or pre-human, nature out of which it has evolved. For, evidently, our species can be described as a wholly ‘natural’ product of that evolutionary process – emergent entirely according to biological, chemical and ultimately physical laws and remaining always constituted by dependence on its natural affordances, and thus as fully a part of nature in Mill’s first sense. Equally evidently, its emergence realises a form of being whose essential character (whose ‘nature’, in a further complexity of usage) is to exercise conscious intentional agency of a kind distinctive from, and thus implicitly set over against, anything else in the natural world. And here it is not a matter of juggling different emphases within some evaluative dialogue, but of confronting a direct clash of attributions and accompanying attitudes. To think of nature as a realm of being and activity of which humanity is just one part, a part wholly constituted by and thus internally related to its terrestrial biospheric affordances, is to think of it as a domain over the governing powers and forces of which we have *ultimately* no

Natural limitation

control, since those forces must govern all our attempts to exercise such control just as they govern all else which happens. It is, by the same token, to think of any changes which we bring about in the operation or scope of those natural affordances as changes also in ourselves – and thus to recognise, as the biologist Rachel Carson once remarked, that we are only ‘a tiny part of a vast and incredible universe’, and that any ‘war against nature’ or attempted ‘conquest’ of nature in which humanity finds itself engaged will really be a war against ourselves (Brooks 1989: 319). On the other hand, in order to approach the world as a store of resources, the use of which is potentially under our control (that is, the status of which we can change, often fairly drastically, to suit ourselves), and thus to think of ourselves as remaining the same through any such process, we have to adopt Mill’s second definition of nature as a realm distinct from and over against that of human agency, a realm which it is deeply characteristic of that agency to seek to dominate and transform.

Natural limitation

Nor are these radical differences in conception and approach of theoretical interest only – they have urgent practical relevance for our environmental concerns. Thus, for example, whether we are thinking of humans as apart from and over against nature or as an integral part of it will make a crucial difference to how we think about *natural limits*, and thus to what we might do about them. If such limits are imposed by something which is apart from and over against our conscious intentions and our will (according to Mill’s second meaning of Nature), that means that, while we have to take the interconnectedness and threshold-dependence of natural systems carefully into account when pursuing our ends, doing so will also run strongly to thinking about how we can accommodate system changes and feedback effects by technological intervention. Generally, we will see recognition of ecological limits as a condition of careful environmental management – wise *use of resources* – with a view to extending the boundaries of safe ecological space for the operations of human agency. We shall, in other words, take ourselves to be externally related to natural limitation, thinking of it as a set of conditions that we can in principle control and manipulate to suit ourselves.

If, however, we are thinking of ourselves as fully and integrally part of nature’s ecological interconnectedness (within Mill’s first meaning of Nature), natural limits as a condition of that interconnectedness will be features to which we are internally related, features not just bearing on us but constitutive of us. They will constrain everything we do, including our attempts to manage or manipulate

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natural limits. In this view, we should be prepared to recognise that our capacities to engage in complex technological interventions (attempts at geoengineering the stratosphere, for instance) will themselves, as natural phenomena in Mill's *first* sense, be liable to involve thresholds – say, of achievable coherence – which it is important to acknowledge and would be dangerous to exceed. And crucially, if there are complex-system limits to our ability to manage complex systems, those meta-limits will have to be accepted as *beyond* our management.

(Here is a simple analogy for this meta-limitation. Suppose someone has only a very scanty knowledge of German for reasons external to herself – maybe her school didn't teach it, so that she has just gleaned scraps from tourist phrase-books, or maybe her teacher was ineffectual. She can, if she chooses, do something about this. But suppose she only retains smatterings because, although well enough taught, she just has no gift for languages. Then that condition is also going to limit anything she now tries to do about it, by way of Teach Yourself courses or whatever – her linguistic limitations constrain what she can do about those very limitations. Similarly, the really constraining natural limits may be those on what humans, as themselves one wholly embedded manifestation of natural phenomena – just one more species, after all – can do to work around the upcoming planetary boundaries towards which their own activity is leading them.)

The two views of our natural situatedness which generate these very different attitudes and approaches to natural limitation, and inevitably therefore to much else of urgent importance within the fields of climate and ecological policy, are always both open to us. Indeed, it seems inherent in our current ruling conception of ourselves as an evolved species that they should be so. Neither can be shown to be illusory, and equally neither is the more fundamental, since each implies the other. To see humanity as fully a part of nature, and therefore nature as everything that happens including everything humans do and think, is to be reflectively aware of humanity, nature and their relation in a mode of consciousness which we can also at the same time recognise to be uniquely distinctive of human beings, and as such setting us apart from the rest by giving us a *perspective* on it (something which you can only have on anything from *outside* it). But to have the perceptual and reflexive consciousness capable of such a perspective is to have a kind of being which has evolved from earlier primate phases and more primitive modes of awareness, wholly through the operation of natural laws, and which therefore must belong wholly to the domain which these laws govern. (It is inherent in the

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very idea of a natural law that there could be no process wholly subject to it from which could emerge anything not wholly subject to it.)

Yet we must recognise that, while there are always available these two ways of thinking about ourselves in relation to nature, and that which of them we adopt has significant implications, there is also a very strong and deep-seated human drive to emphasise only one of them – to see ourselves as over against the natural world, as the only self-conscious radical choosers which terrestrial Nature has produced, and therefore as at least potentially effective managers and manipulators of it and of the resources which we thereby take it as offering us. In other words, the kind of dual consciousness of ourselves in Nature to which Mill is pointing finds itself routinely and powerfully skewed towards a tendency to take his second sense – humans as conscious agents on the one hand, and all the ‘natural’ rest over against them on the other – as our operative one. Why should this be so? For, when one step backs, as we have just been doing, to review the conceptual landscape, it can seem quite strangely arbitrary that we should so readily screen out Mill’s first sense of nature, with humans as wholly a part of it, and instead operate so determinedly from within his second sense in which it is set over against us as our surrounding ‘natural environment’, something which it is the essential human project to manipulate, control and indeed (as Mill himself insists) improve on if we can. Whence comes the powerful tendency to think in this way? This is the question on which I want to focus in the rest of this chapter. At the deepest level, it is the question of how this *external* relatedness of humanity to its environment could have arisen out of a preceding totality organised exclusively by *internal* relations. Such a totality constitutes a domain in which, recalling from Chapter 1 Commoner’s first law of ecology, ‘everything is connected to everything else’, so that nothing alters anything or makes use of anything without also altering its own terms of existence (the rabbits in his own example being no more a food supply for the lynxes than the lynxes are a regulator of sustainable numbers for the rabbits). How *do* we get from this picture to that of nature as *resource*?

It will actually take a good deal of the book to offer a full answer to this question. Here, I want to set the scene for what follows by considering two attempts to answer it which I think get matters revealingly wrong. Both of these accounts have in their different ways a *socio-cultural* cast; both seek to explain our inclination to picture humans as set apart from nature, and thus in a position significantly to control and even to dominate it, as something read back, as it were, into our natural situatedness from our experience of societies in which some humans are

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set apart from other humans whom they dominate and control. And both, I shall argue, beg what I have called the deep question at issue in essentially the same way.

Ecofeminism

The first, and in my view the less persuasive, such account is the *ecological feminist* position classically developed by Karen Warren (1990) and Val Plumwood (1993), and more recently endorsed by such writers as Greta Gaard (2011). These authors claim that the tendency to see humans as apart from and over against nature represents a thematic extension of patriarchal attitudes towards the relations between men and women. Such attitudes are taken to consist in reading a range of differences between the sexes in a dualistic mode supporting value hierarchies, which are in turn used to justify the subordination of women to men. ('Dualistic' here is taken to describe a relation of radical exclusion and opposition between orders constructed as systematically superior and inferior.) In an analogy appealing to certain historical and cultural associations between the female and the natural, it is then claimed that differences between humans and the rest of nature (principally associated with humans' status as rational beings) are similarly read dualistically to separate humans off from, and then elevate them above, naturally-occurring objects and systems, in order to justify our use of these elements as resources which we can exploit and manipulate. So a dualistic interpretation of the differences between reason and emotion, or between production and reproduction, both pairs associated respectively with male and female, is supposedly (Plumwood 1993: 43) carried over to those between mind and body, rationality and animality or culture and nature (in, obviously, Mill's second sense of the latter term). Seeing humans as sharply separate from nature, like seeing men as sharply differentiated from women (for instance, as characteristically rational where women are characteristically emotional) is thus explained as essentially a strategy of domination, in which a subordinating relationship is simultaneously both asserted and justified

This approach is in tune with the more general feminist critique of canonical Western philosophy's emphasis on rationality as the defining human (but actually, it is claimed, characteristically masculine) virtue, with its emphasis on drawing sharp distinctions rather than recognising interconnections and interdependence across the board, as a contrastingly holistic (and allegedly feminine) understanding might try to do. And it is certainly true that reasoning conducted according to the forms of classical logic does depend on the drawing of artificially sharp distinctions. As Plumwood points out (1993: 52), it relies fundamentally on taking

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negation, whether of a predicate or of a proposition, as a one-dimensional notion which ‘forces us to consider otherness with respect to a single universe consisting of everything’: just as not- F characterises everything which falls outside the extension of F , so not- p characterises every scenario in which the proposition p fails to hold true. (‘The bus isn’t late’ is true in all situations in which it is not the case that the bus is late, ranging from its being on time to the vaporisation of the Earth shortly prior to its timetabled appearance.) The argument is then that this way of modelling conceptual relations readily lays itself open to the kind of abuse to which feminists point.

Consider, for instance, the distinction between reason and emotion. This can be made sharply, as when we say that a reason remains a reason whatever anyone feels or might feel about it, whereas emotion is precisely what you *do* feel about things. Acknowledging this does not entail denying that real-life reasons and emotions are almost always more or less subtly interdependent, but drawing the distinction can also be practically important, as for instance in a court of law. In that sort of context we might want to say:

All good judicial decisions are free from the influence of emotion,

as part of pursuing a claim that some particular decision was flawed. This depends, as we can see from the associated Venn diagram (Figure 1), on drawing a sharp line *for the immediate purposes of argument* between actions free from emotional influence and all the rest of human activity, indeed of all activity anywhere – that is, on invoking the universe-wide negation of classical logic:

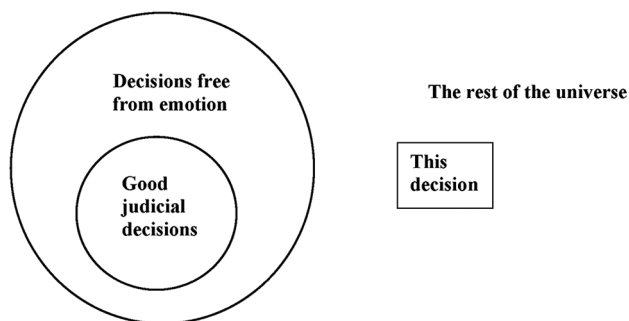


Figure 1. Classical Logic.

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But then, if you are interested in justifying hierarchy and domination, it is (claim the feminists) an easy step from drawing this sharp distinction for this particular purpose to seeing everything outside the circle of the unemotional as a sort of seething undifferentiated sea of emotionality, defined by a negative (*not free*), of which emotion-free actions are such by being independent, and thus by in a sense rising above – and now you do indeed seem to have introduced a hierarchy of value which can be appealed to in order to *justify* the subordination of emotions to reason, and thus (it is argued on the basis of historical associations and identifications) of women to men. Here we have the supposedly male-driven ‘dualistic logic of domination’ which Karen Warren (1990: 128–30) lays out:

- A is sharply distinguished from B, on which its dependence is thereby denied (Dualism)
- A (as thus ‘rising above’ B) is taken as superior to B (Hierarchy)
- A’s superiority to B is taken to justify B’s subordination to A (Domination)

If, in pursuit of this programme, we put *men* for A and *women* for B, or think of reputedly typical characteristics of each in this way, we get what could be taken as a justification of patriarchy, the subordination of women economically, politically and domestically. By the same token, putting *human* for A and *natural* for B, or substituting similar distinctions like that between *actively choosing* and *just happening*, or *producing* and *growing*, we get an apparent justification for the domination and exploitation of the natural world as a set of resources for humans. And, crucially, reading this justification along this line of argument clearly supports the ecofeminist strategy of portraying this wider domination too as male-driven, configured by masculinist reason, and serving the interests of males.

Now it will be apparent that a lot of this is, to say the least, tendentious. Warren’s aetiology of domination, for example, could only really convince someone determined to understand its stages with domination already the end in view, and so to ignore some rather obvious counterexamples. (I am sharply distinguished from my publisher, but by no means independent of her; I am wholly independent of all the other publishers to whom I have not submitted this work, but that has no tendency whatever to make me feel superior to them.) Further, if one pauses to ask whether human exploitation of nature really *is* male-driven, the analogy with patriarchy ceases to be wholly persuasive. (Women, at least on the available evidence, certainly demand and consume a lot of *stuff*. More seriously, no-one with much experience of real relations between men and women could suppose, except as a

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parti pris for polemical purposes, that either sex was inherently better attuned to the independent spontaneity of living nature than the other.) Even more basically, however, the attempt to pin the blame for an exclusionary and subordinating male mindset on Aristotle and classical logic is simply misconceived, and it is worth a brief excursus here to show why.

Notoriously, the truth-functional approach to propositional relations which goes with classical negation (where either p or not- p must be true for any proposition, or in other words *true* and *false* are the only truth-values, and exclusionary boundaries are absolutely sharp), yields results which sometimes run counter to our intuitive sense of what follows from what. Thus, on that approach, it follows from the joint truth of p and q that q follows from p – symbolically, $(p \& q) \supset (p \supset q)$ is valid. And this does make a certain kind of sense: if p and q are indeed both true, there remains no possible arrangement of the respective truth-values in which the truth of q does not, as it were, come along with the truth of p , and this *coming along with* is the only representation of *following from* which we can achieve in purely truth-functional terms. (The relation between propositions indicated by the logical sign ' \supset ' is that which guarantees by its holding that the truth of the antecedent proposition is accompanied by that of the consequent.) But from (say) Britain's being an island and Socrates' being dead, it seems clearly *not* to follow that Socrates' passing *follows from* Britain's geographical situation. Our ordinary reasoning, say from Socrates' being dead to Plato's being upset, seems to turn on a requirement that the propositions involved have not only the appropriate truth-relations, but at least something *to do* with each other – some kind of mutual relevance. Similarly, when I negate the predicate (say) 'plays chess', I do not naturally intend the predicate 'does not play chess' to range over *everything* (including trees, goats, the Moon and so on) which falls outside the extension of 'plays chess' – considerations of relevance apply here too. (If, asked to characterise a tree, I say, 'Well, for one thing, it doesn't play chess', I have certainly said something *irrelevant*, both to the question and to the tree.) So we are inclined to take a negation like 'does not play chess' as ranging in actual usage not over everything other than those who do, but over *relevant* others: those, perhaps, who do not play but in principle could. And then (to stick with this kind of case), the relevant other for 'decisions free of emotion' from our earlier example would be – what? 'Decisions relevantly influenced by emotion, perhaps? – 'relevantly', because one is not contrasting emotion-free decisions with *every* emotionally-swayed decision, such as deciding not to order curry because one detests it, but only with those where the emotion is somehow

interfering with the decision. This would yield something like the logical terrain mapped in Figure 2:

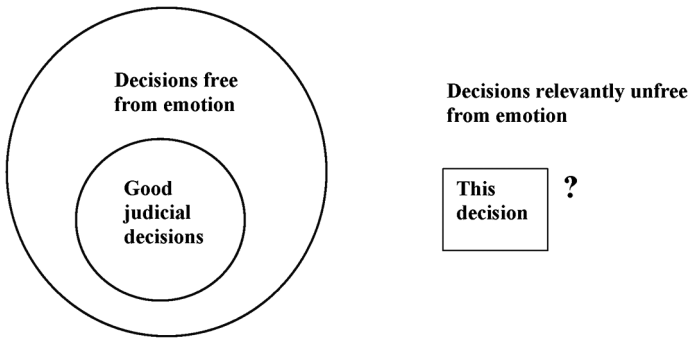


Figure 2. Relevant Logic.

But the rub here goes, of course, with the introduced question-mark. For as soon as issues of relevance are in the frame, *judgements* of relevance must be in the frame – and it becomes a matter of judgement not only which of a range of decisions is being relevantly excluded from the set of the emotionless, but also whether this particular decision was emotionally affected in the right way to be included among them (and thus to appear in the picture at all). The definitiveness of the conclusion's necessarily following from the premises, of this decision's *having* to lie outwith the set of good ones because it lies outwith the set in which that set is wholly contained – that definitiveness which is bought at the price of accepting the classical assumptions underpinning Figure 1 – has vanished.

Why does this matter, if we are nevertheless more accurately approximating the ordinary reasoning processes which classical logic appears to misrepresent? It matters because, if our sense of what validly follows from what becomes a matter of judgement, it becomes a matter of something wholly dependent on our sense of what validly follows from what (since that sense is really all that 'judgement' operationalises), and we are adrift with no independent standard of validity. And the whole point of classically-modelled logic is to provide us with just such a standard, to be used as an heuristic device. Classical negation and truth-functionality construct, precisely, a *model* of reasoning which works to identify what follows from what without the intervention of disputable judgements of relevance. If we want to defend the claim that this was not a good judicial decision in terms of the relations between good decisions and emotional influence, Figure 1 with its

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artificially sharp boundaries provides us with a clear-cut warrant for doing so, and at the same time shows us what judicial decisions should aim at, what their ideal standard is, even while we recognise (and adjust as appropriate for the recognition) that in practice the exclusion of emotion from judicial or indeed most other kinds of reasoning can never be total.

For a general account of our attention to the world which acknowledges such heuristic usages, we might turn to that of the philosopher-neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist (2009; 2021) based on brain-hemisphere differentiation. McGilchrist identifies two different and strongly contrasting modes of attention, rooted respectively in the left and right hemispheres of the human brain, the co-operation between which our engagement with the world reflects. These hemispheres have evolved (and not just in humans, though the effects with us are massively amplified by language and culture), so that the left attends primarily in terms of distinguishable objects and objectively-configured relations between them and specific manipulative tasks, while the right attends to the whole circumambient situation, including in particular conspecifics and potential predators – that is, the life-context – in which it finds itself embedded. These contrasting ‘world-views’ of the two hemispheres summarise and are supported in McGilchrist’s account by a mass of experimental evidence from cases in which one or the other hemisphere has had its world-responsive activity interrupted by trauma or clinical intervention, while the subject’s remaining ‘world’ is variously monitored. The survival value of running two such differing modes of attention in parallel is obvious, though a creature capable of being aware of itself as a single individual must also combine them to locate itself within a unified world. The analytic, compartmentalising left hemisphere is the locus of logic, explicitness and decontextualisation, taking the world as a self-contained and coherently-connected system from which its own activity has been excluded by its very mode of attention. This is to set up a working model of the world, which it is the right hemisphere’s contrasting role to recuperate by recognising it *as* a model, an extrajected representation of a complex holistic totality in relation to which we are never actually mere observers, but always embedded and intrinsically active. For *not* recognising the model as a model, occluding its status as such in the way that the left hemisphere on its own is inclined to do, is just what jeopardises its intelligibility – it leads to our asking questions about it which we are logically debarred from answering. If, for example, one searches one’s model railway layout for the model passengers who appear not to be boarding the trains, one’s failure to find them will not be a merely empirical matter, but

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the upshot of one's having confused a model with what it is modelling. Similarly, when we object to the counter-intuitive implications of truth-functionality and classical negation, this is to treat a structure of conceptual modelling as though it had to make sense entirely on its own terms, as it is precisely the essence and point of a model not to do.

Through its intuitive awareness of the partiality of left-hemisphere vision, the right hemisphere reintegrates the model's systematised upshots into an improved holistic grasp, tacitly acknowledging the active world-framing which the model actually subserves. Or rather, this is how it operates in a culture which does not, as McGilchrist argues that Western modernity has fallen into doing, dangerously mistake the left-hemisphere's logical and causal modelling of the world for the world being modelled. He himself imputes this epochal error to scientific Enlightenment – and it seems that, for all its attempts to distinguish itself from the Western mainstream, ecofeminism is tending in the same direction and making the same kind of mistake when it conceives the heuristic logical modelling of conceptual connections as an oppressor-prompted and would-be oppression-justifying misrepresentation of real-world relations. Ecofeminism, that is, would seem to embody a kind of failure of creative human wholeness to which, as deeply characteristic of modernity, we shall need to recur later in the book.

The greatest danger inherent in the whole ecofeminist psychodrama, meanwhile, is its occluding what is fundamentally at issue here. For as an explanation of why humans tend to think of themselves as separate from and over against the natural world, it seems to beg the question which it is supposed to be answering. It claims that resort to Warren's logic of domination follows the allegedly characteristic pattern of male-female relations by weaponising differences between humans and nature, converting them into hierarchical dualisms in order to justify an exploitative attitude to the resources which nature provides. But the crucial question is surely how we encounter such differences in the first place. Consider the list of distinctions which Plumwood offers us, distinctions which she claims (1993: 42–43) 'permeate western culture', including:

mind / body
 freedom / necessity
 universal / particular
 public / private
 subject / object
 ...

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But in all these cases (and the sample is in this respect representative of her whole list), the distinction turns on taking the first member of each pair as standing in an external relation to the second. Thus mind is what can remain itself through bodily changes, a genuine choice is free (we cannot help feeling) precisely through its independence of necessity, the universal transcends all its particulars (we could eliminate every red thing while *redness* remained untouched), and the public realm subsists third-personally, independently of the varying private and first-personal perspectives which meet and are reconciled in it. And somewhere at the root of this whole pattern lies the subject / object distinction, which *inherently* insists on the former term as external to and independent of the latter – for if the subject were to merge in any way with any of its objects, it would need to recoil again at the same stroke into the pure subjectivity capable of grasping any such combination *as* object. (Nothing can be an object for my thought except in a perspective having my subjectivity as its origin, which subjectivity therefore cannot itself be objectivised.) So what we really need to understand is how this pervasive architectonic of contrasts, with the distinctive mode of being from which it evidently stems, itself *arises with humanity*, even before any sharply dualistic reading of it, out of a preceding totality within which everything natural can also be thought of as holistically inter-variable. This is, once again, the question prompted by Mill's distinction between the two senses of 'Nature', and the ecofeminist account leaves it simply hanging in the air.

It should be noted that there is no corresponding question-begging going on when we are thinking about the basis of patriarchy. The subordination of women to men has been around for a very long time, for a variety of physical, socio-cultural and maybe ethological reasons, with historically no powerful alternative paradigm of equality challenging attention until quite recently – until, in fact, technological developments started to erode the truth of the age-old characterisation of women as the weaker sex. The wrenching of male-female differences towards hierarchical dualisms could thus perhaps plausibly be seen to underpin an embedded male habit of trying to emphasise and justify this already long-established subordination. But as we noted earlier in relation to Mill, there *is* a powerful alternative paradigm to seeing humans as subordinators of the natural world considered externally as a store of potential resources – namely, the paradigm provided by his first sense of Nature, in which we see humans as thoroughly immersed in, dependent on and inseparable from the world around them. Thus, if by analogy with patriarchy we are using Warren's logic of domination to emphasise our status as externally related

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to the rest of nature in order to justify attitudes which are only there to be justified in virtue of our having already recognised ourselves, via Plumwood's catalogue of differences, as thus externally related, then the tendency to think in that way in the first place, rather than in the inclusive, holistic, everything-is-Nature way, has not been genuinely explained.

Social ecology

Another attempt to explain that ruling tendency has been the approach of *social ecology*, which again we shall consider as presented by a classical exponent, in this case the American anarchist Murray Bookchin. His main work *The Ecology of Freedom* opens with the claim that 'the very notion of the domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human' (Bookchin 1982: 1). This means, as he spells it out elsewhere (2022: 102), that

There is no hierarchy, domination, class structure or state in the natural world – only what the socially conditioned human mind projects onto non-human biological relationships.

He wants, in other words, to see relations of hierarchy, domination and exploitation as arising only in 'second nature', which is what he calls human society, the realm of freedom, and then being read back into 'first nature' – the realm of necessity from which second nature has emerged – so that we see that natural world as something which is there *for humans*, something which they can use for their own purposes, essentially as standing reserve or set of resources. In developing this picture, Bookchin does not ignore the fact that hierarchical relations do appear to be found in first nature – primates, for instance, 'relate to each other in ways that seem to involve "dominance" and "submission"' (1982: 28). But he argues that to see these patterns of behaviour as having the institutionalised character that they have in human affairs is an exercise of precisely the sort of reading-back which he claims to identify. (Baboons, for example, may submit to the alpha males among them, but nothing here corresponds to the attempted *justification* of domination which hierarchical arrangements represent for humans, and so the term 'hierarchy' as applied to describe baboon troops is really only a metaphor misleadingly drawn from the human condition.)

Now it is evident that such an explanation of the exploitative approach to nature owes us an account of how hierarchy and domination did in fact arise in human society, if they are not to be seen as inherited from 'first nature' itself. This

Social ecology

is especially the case insofar as Bookchin explicitly envisages an original form of society, 'organic society' as he terms it, in which these modes of relation were still absent, as much between humans and (first) nature as among humans themselves:

Neolithic artefacts seem to reflect a community of humanity and nature that patently expressed the communion of humans with each other: a solidarity of the community with the world of life that articulated an internal solidarity within the community itself. (1982: 61)

Whence then do hierarchy and domination come, to subvert this paradisaical unity in both directions? It has to be acknowledged that, although he avoids the tendentious focus on gender dynamics which characterises ecofeminism, Bookchin offers only a rather diffuse and unsatisfactory set of suggestions here. More frequent intercommunal strife as human numbers increased, leading to a higher valuation of the characteristically male attributes of aggressiveness and mobility (unimpeded by infants), is certainly one pressure towards hierarchical structures which he cites. So too, apparently, are the emerging interests of the aged as a coherent social force:

They have most to gain by the institutionalisation of society and the emergence of hierarchy, for it is within this realm and as a result of this process that they can retain powers that are denied to them by physical weakness and infirmity. (1982: 81)

There may even, he suggests, have been a tendency in the same direction arising from the need of shamans to acquire groups of burly bodyguards as insurance against popular resentment when their supposedly magical interventions in weather management and the like were seen to fail.

None of this speculation really adds much to saying, as indeed in one place he rather ingenuously does, that hierarchy just happened:

In the intermediate zone between first and second nature that saw the graded passage of biological evolution into social, social evolution began to assume increasingly hierarchical form. Whether this could have been avoided is impossible to say – and meaningless to divine. (2022: 98)

The trouble with that, however, is that it slides insouciantly past, just as ecofeminism strides dogmatically past, the real question at issue here. For hierarchy (some people acquiring a status licensing them to control and direct others) and domination (their actually controlling and directing them) are both arrangements structured by *external* relations between human beings – since I only *control* you by, essentially, making you move or change relative to my staying where and how I am, that is, by

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treating you as an instrument or resource for my purposes. And what we want to know is how that kind of relation not only might have, but intelligibly *could* have, emerged from an 'organic' form of society structured by the pervasively internal relatedness of mutuality and interdependence.

Bookchin is prevented from seeing this as the real question, I suspect, by the uncritical way in which as a committed anarchist in the tradition of Kropotkin he is always inclined to assume an equivalence between hierarchy, domination and *oppression*. But while oppression, which involves some people banding together to make others do things contrary to the latter's interests, might always be regrettable, this is far from being always true of arrangements under which some people simply tell others what to do. Both hierarchy and domination – the organised exercise of mastery – can have perfectly positive functional roles in human solidarity, or 'the communion of humans with each other'. A society which depends on hunting for its survival, for instance, clearly benefits when those who know how to hunt, or whose long experience indicates to them the best times and places to hunt, are in positions of authority enabling them to instruct others less well equipped to do whatever is needful. It is only when such arrangements crystallise, as often they do, into structures serving the interests of one segment of the community over against another, rather than of the community as a whole, that oppression becomes a possibility. But organised authority in its constructive functional sense is inherent in the emergence and consolidation of second nature as such, because it is inherent in the process by which humans come to understand themselves as free agents over against a first-natural world of objects in the causal interactions of which they can hope to intervene. And it is a perfectly natural and thematic step from grasping the objective world in this way to encountering other humans, too, as potentially instrumental to the achievement of particular purposes (a way of encountering them which only becomes oppressive if we forget the vital distinction, later so fundamental to Kantian morality, between using others as means to our ends, and using them *only* as such means, without regard to their own interests and concerns).

Bookchin in fact wants to celebrate the process of differentiation leading humans in this direction as something radically creative:

Taken together, 'second nature', the human species which forms it, and the richly conceptual form of thinking and communication so distinctive to it, emerges out of natural evolution no less than any other life-form and non-human community – and this second nature is uniquely different from first nature in that it can act thinkingly, purposefully, wilfully... (1999: 288)

A deeper explanation?

But he also wants to accuse it, and vehemently, of corrupting our attitudes to the natural world:

Our mental, and later our factual dissociation of society from nature rests on the barbarous objectification of human beings into means of production and targets of domination – an objectification we have projected upon the entire world of life. (1982: 316)

He cannot, however, have it both ways. If hierarchical social arrangements are a human possibility created at the same stroke as our whole second-natural realm of freedom, which is in turn constituted by our recognition of first nature as a world of objects over against us and potentially manipulable by us to our own ends, then even oppressive forms of such social arrangements cannot be blamed for our so recognising the natural world in the first place. We cannot *learn* the objectification in terms of which we have to encounter nature in order to set up human free agency, from its result at several removes in the (sometimes) self-interested objectification of human beings by other human beings.

A deeper explanation?

So both ecofeminism and social ecology fail to explain humanity's sense of apartness from nature, its view of the natural as there to be dominated by humans, a reservoir of essentially manipulable resources for human purposes; and they fail for the same kind of reason in each case. Both seek to trace that perceived external relatedness as between humans and nature to characteristic patterns of dominance and subordination within human society, which patterns are then read back (and by clear implication, misapplied) to our natural situation. But both allow themselves to assume starting premises – ecofeminism its fault-line of primitive differences, social ecology its concept of 'second nature' – into which is already built the very external-relatedness, the emergence of which out of a holistically-integrated 'first nature' they are committed to explaining. The point of having introduced this critique of the two accounts, similarly flawed as I take them to be, at this early stage in the book is to emphasise the conclusion suggested by the pattern of failure which they jointly exhibit: that a satisfactory explanation for our ruling 'external' stance towards the natural world must therefore look much deeper than socio-cultural contingencies within human affairs. It would seem reasonable to suppose that any derivation of that stance from particularly-configured human-to-human relations in the present will be found to beg the basic question in the same way,

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when it seeks to explain how those relations themselves arose. Any adequate account, by contrast, would need to appeal to something fundamental enough to explain what Bookchin calls our 'objectification' *both* of the world of life *and* of our fellow humans, and that would have to be something lying very near to the roots of human being and experience as such.

My project in the rest of this book is to work towards such an account. That must take us, as the last requirement makes clear, eventually into existential metaphysics as well as epistemology. It will also have important political implications. For one consideration which sometimes recommends approaches such as those of Bookchin and the ecofeminists is that they make the business of correcting our collective (and now increasingly dangerous) exploitation of the natural world into a comparatively simple matter. Our task, it would seem, is to reorganise society for the 'liberation' of the respectively 'oppressed' human groups – for ecofeminism, women in general; for Bookchin, it often seems, anyone controlled or directed within any institutionalised structure of official, class or State authority. In so doing, it is supposed, we should be re-educating and transforming the attitudes through which we dominate and 'oppress' the world of nature. Correspondingly, the ethical impulse really prompting us to such transformation would be the modernly very familiar appeal – now so often invoked, and so readily provocative of energising indignation – to 'justice for the oppressed'. If, however, what is required in proper response to our climate and ecological plight is in the first place a radically transformed understanding of human being, rather than – or at any rate, prior to – any exercises in social re-engineering, the case looks at once much less straightforward, and both morally and intellectually a good deal more complex.

We will come later to the metaphysics and the politics. The immediately following part of the book addresses the issue of morality. Environmental ethics, as I noted in the introductory chapter, has always sought to insist that our moral responsibilities in this field run considerably wider than not harming or cheating or otherwise oppressing present human others, important as not doing so of course remains. That insistence represents at least one kind of recognition that merely socio-cultural analyses of our environmental plight and its relational dilemmas must be inadequate, as must 'solutions' dependent essentially on present people behaving better towards other present people. But how adequate have the variously extensionist environmental-ethical models themselves been to grappling with the fundamental human-natural relations here at stake? To that question we now turn.

PART II.
ENVIRONMENTAL MORALITIES

❧ Chapter 3 ❧

Protecting Future People?

We have seen that the pressures towards climate and biospheric destabilisation which now gravely threaten humanity's 'safe operating space' accumulate from the carbon and other environmental consequences of a myriad individual daily actions across the world. These are overwhelmingly actions, like boiling a kettle or buying something wrapped in plastic or driving to work, which are in themselves ordinary and unremarkable components of an increasingly globalised Western lifestyle (encouraged and embedded by the global capitalism whose profits depend on it). We have also recognised the prudential incentive represented by the standard collective action dilemma – the incentive not to make difficulties and inconveniences for oneself by trying to change these patterns of individual behaviour in one's own case before everyone else does so in theirs, so that no-one really moves even as the cumulatively destructive tendencies of all this are increasingly understood. And yet there patently has to be a robust basis for intervening remedially in this situation if it is not to become an accelerating slide into catastrophe.

Hardin's recourse for resisting the Tragedy of the Commons, it will be recalled, was 'mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon by the majority of people affected' (Hardin 1968: 1247). Alter this minimally by putting *restraint* for *coercion*, and one has a good rough characterisation of *morality* – insofar as we think of that as a code of behaviour by which all are expected to abide, and are socially sanctioned for failing to abide, in the interests of all. Such reflections, as I have already acknowledged both in the Introduction and at the end of Chapter 1, draw one strongly to see the environmental challenge in an ethical light. What Charles Darwin (1871/1981: 70) called 'that short but imperious word *ought*', together with its if anything even more imperious corollary *ought not*, come seemingly irresistibly into the frame.

Harm and morality

One of the things which it has always been plainest to our ordinary moral sense that (absent a limited range of special circumstances) one *ought not* to do, is to hurt or otherwise harm other people. This offers what seems like a particularly

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straightforward template for moralising our environmental situation. For what has become evident about the presently-favoured Westernised lifestyle, with its carbon-heavy, resource-intensive, mobility-dependent and largely urbanised character, is precisely that it is producing consequences that will involve very significant harm. Although offering many apparent (and some real) benefits to those now enjoying it, this way of living is shredding the Earth's biosphere and drastically disturbing its climate, and in so doing is damaging the health, jeopardising the physical security and narrowing the life-chances of future people, the more grievously the further into the future one looks. Such harmful effects will rapidly develop a reach and intensity very far outweighing any present benefits of the activities on which they are consequential. Here, then, is surely something which – whatever any merely prudential calculations might suggest – one simply ought not to be doing, or more precisely to have any part, however minimal, in doing.

That last qualification is important because, as we have also already seen, our relevant present actions as individuals cannot be charged by themselves with damaging anything or harming anybody – the idea of a personal carbon or ecological 'footprint' being in that regard seriously misleading. We are not here in a situation analogous to that of the Harmless Torturers imagined by the late Oxford philosopher Derek Parfit (1984: 80), where each one of a thousand agents turns a dial to increase fractionally the intensity of an electric current, thereby collectively making it strong enough to inflict severe pain on a set of victims. Here each dial-shift makes a difference too small to be perceived by anyone on the receiving end as painful, but there is a strong intuition that the agents, though individually causing no perceptible harm, are still individually blameworthy for contributing their mite towards agony. (We must assume, for the issue of blame to arise at all, that they are informed of the whole set-up in which they are participating.) But unlike each dial-turn, adding its tiny pulse of increased voltage, my emissions by themselves do not cause even imperceptible *ecological* damage, since it is in the nature of ecological effects not to accumulate incrementally but to occur as whole-system transitions only when a certain triggering level of pressure is reached. While my individual emissions certainly contribute infinitesimally towards the attainment of that level, they do not impact any victims in the way which the individual torturers directly, albeit imperceptibly, do. Nevertheless, an emissions-heavy lifestyle pursued by ever-increasing numbers of present people is undoubtedly lining up those desperately adverse conditions for huge cohorts of future people – indeed, for most of the global population in a comparatively few short decades. And if

Harm and morality

there is a moral obligation on present people, considered collectively, not to do that, then each of us has a transferred such obligation to play our due individual part in bringing about the necessary changes. Here of course is the point of getting everyone to appreciate the carbon and other environmental consequences of their own personal life-choices – consequences which most of my likely readers would seem to have that kind of transferred moral duty to *reduce*, even when they have seen through the ‘footprint’ metaphor.

A point to note here, the relevance of which will become apparent shortly, is that the possibility of harming future generations must resolve itself into that of harming individual future members of each respective generation. This is implicit in the concept of *harm*: one cannot harm a collective except in ways which ultimately cause harm to its members. Against that, it might seem that, for example, changes in market conditions could harm a company, by narrowing its trading options, and that this is something adverse which could only befall the company rather than its shareholders and employees, who of course do not in the same sense have trading options. But unless harm to these latter persons ensues, in the form, say, of reduced dividends and job losses or increased job insecurity, the idea of harm to *the company itself* is simply drained of significance. Harm can only consist in adverse consequences for those who possess organs of sensibility to suffering, or to being rendered worse off, as no collective considered as such does. By the same token, then, we can think of harming a future generation in terms of reducing the proportion of its members to whom it will be open to lead flourishing lives, and this is an effect which cannot be produced on those individuals themselves (who do not have members, at least in that sense); but this will be meaningless if it does not come down ultimately to the harm to be suffered by those who are, within that generation, prevented from being able to flourish.

Unfortunately, however, a moral requirement not to participate in harming future people environmentally cannot be generated in this apparently straightforward way. Individual future people do not have what we might call the *solidity* to be the objects of such a requirement.

This is not, importantly, an epistemic matter – it does not turn on distance in time as an analogue of distance in space. No doubt the latter kind of distance does sometimes work to reduce the stringency with which we feel morally bound. There is a strong gut reaction, at any rate in most people, against harming someone immediately present (hitting them gratuitously with a hammer, for instance), while cutting out one’s £20 a month to Oxfam even when one knows that it could save

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a child's sight in Africa is often much easier to cope with. But Parfit (again) has proposed another helpful thought-experiment here to suggest why we should not allow mere distance this intervening power. If I loose off an arrow towards a coppice on the horizon, and it chances to kill some stranger whom I did not know to be lurking among the trees, I cannot avoid legitimate blame for my lethal carelessness. Equally, the 'arrow' of my casually withdrawn contribution will impact quite anonymously among those who badly need it, but I should not here let myself off the hook of an essentially equal blameworthiness. Similarly, says Parfit, if we loose off arrows of collectively-generated damage towards the future biosphere, we would surely remain blameable for any harm caused, however anonymous to our present perceptions the victims of these actions. The real point, though – also due to Parfit – is that, not only are our future putative victims anonymous in this way, but their very existence is contingent on our present actions: and this radically affects the possibility of our harming them at all by such broad-scope choices as the adoption of particular policy-regimes in respect of significant social issues.

Parfit's non-identity argument

This recognition is owed, as I say, to Parfit in his ground-breaking 1984 book *Reasons and Persons*, but it has been well encapsulated (in prose less rigorously unforgiving than Parfit's own tends to be) by Edward Page, and with specific reference to its environmental implications:

Decisions concerning alternative environmental, and other, policies will influence not just the quality of life of future generations, but also their size and composition. As a result, they are not easily evaluated in terms of ethical concepts, such as harm and benefit, which assume that the same people will live, and be harmed or benefited, however we act. (Page 2006: 132–33)

The last claim here about harm and benefit turns on the conceptual point that to harm someone, you have to do something which makes them worse off than they would have been if you hadn't done it – for which in turn it is a requirement that they would still have been around, in order to be *not* worse off, even if you hadn't done it. (This is the mirror-image of the condition on benefiting someone which we were considering in the context of resources in Chapter 2: you benefit someone, as a resource becomes such by doing, in making them better off than they would have been otherwise.) But then, suppose that the person whom you are allegedly harming or benefiting is someone whose *existence* depends on what

Parfit's non-identity argument

you are relevantly doing – that is to say, someone who could not have been worse or better off if you had not done it, because in that case they would not have come into existence at all.

This supposition forces itself on one as a possibility when one considers just how contingent – how dependent on particular happenings which might not have happened – everyone's existence actually is. And this does not refer just to the single obvious event in this connection, that of one's parents getting it together, but to a huge range of events in the wider world with bearings on whether that connection would actually have come about. Sometimes, indeed, one can know about one particular outstanding such occurrence in one's own backstory. My grandfather, for example, who fought in the trenches in the First World War, used to recount how he was saved on one occasion by an act of disobedience on the part of a comrade, who brought him in badly hurt from No-Man's-Land despite the order for the attack having been to leave behind any wounded on retreat. His wound cost Granddad his arm, but not, as it would otherwise have done, his life, which was thus preserved for him later to father my own father. Without that long-bygone and no doubt split-second decision by his comrade, I should not be here to write these words. Thinking about cases like this, which are not actually all that rare, can produce a kind of existential vertigo. But this gets dramatically worse when one realises that it is not just such moments of drama, but pretty well *anything*, that could have intervened to prevent one, as oneself, from having existed. Again, in Page's words (2006: 133):

This is because all persons owe their existence to the coming together of a particular egg and a particular sperm – and this 'coming together' is highly sensitive to antecedent events.

So suppose, for example, that the bus had failed to turn up on the evening when the woman who became your mother was intending to go out on her first exploratory date with the man who became your father – so that they only became an item a bit later than they actually did. In that case the specific genetic material from the sperm and egg which in fact went to constitute *you* would never have been assembled, and you, the person now reading this, would not have come into existence. (Of course, someone pretty similar might have done so – someone with the same parents, home, upbringing and so on; they wouldn't however have been *you*, just a kind of existential twin.)

But of course, events like non-appearing buses are in turn massively affected by larger-scale transactions, and specifically by public policy decisions. (Think of all

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the possible people who on the same basis failed to come into existence because of bus service privatisation under successive governments since the 1980s.) And this huge element of contingency intervenes, as should now be clear, decisively in the application of the concept of *harm*. Here is another non-environmental example: my generation, those born in the late 1940s or 1950s, were greatly affected by living under the then-new shadow of the atom bomb. I still vividly remember the Cuban missile crisis of 1963, probably the nearest the world has yet come to all-out nuclear war, when as a news-conscious fourteen-year-old I had to go off to school and try to carry on as normal while thinking that I might have only days or even hours to live. Equally, of course, one might want to say that we all profited from the deterrent effect of Mutually Assured Destruction, which was probably what kept the Red Army out of Western Europe during the Cold War. But was I, were we all, thereby harmed by the anxiety, or benefited by the security? On the ground just outlined, we have to answer both these questions in the negative, because if the A-bomb hadn't been invented and used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan would almost certainly not have been forced to surrender in 1945, the Pacific war would have dragged on for maybe another year, and all our fathers who were in the forces wouldn't have got home to court, marry and procreate just when they did – so none, or very few, of us would have been brought into existence to *be* harmed or benefited. We could not have made been either worse or better off than we should have been otherwise by the A-bomb's arrival, because otherwise, we simply shouldn't have *been*. It is from this kind of consideration that Parfit gave the label 'non-identity problem' to his insight here. The later population which enjoys or endures the longer-term effects of policy choice A is mainly non-identical in terms of its constitutive individuals with that which would have come into being had A been rejected in favour of B.

Now clearly, environmental as well as defence or transport policies can have exactly this kind of effect. Page discusses one such example in relation to the Kyoto Protocol. Here is another: will the failure of the recent COP28 UN Conference to commit firmly to the phasing out of fossil fuels harm future generations? Parfit would say: no, strictly speaking not, because, for most people who will be alive in 2120 or thereabouts, their coming into existence will have depended in one way or another on effects of that failure working through society, in the kind of way I have just been illustrating. So as long as they have lives that are worth living at all under the conditions then obtaining, they will not have any retrospective claim against us for having made them worse off by our failure. And, for the same

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reason, we cannot now have any *obligation* to them in this regard, because it is a conceptual point that you can only have a moral obligation to someone to do X if that someone has a moral claim on you that you should do X.

The reaction of many readers to this line of argument will no doubt be to reject it as deeply counterintuitive. One wants to say: 'Oh come on! – *of course* copping out at COP28 (and on all the previous similar occasions) means that our negligence is damaging the prospects of future generations!' Equally, it is very natural to feel that, of two alternative environmental policy regimes, one of which is predicted by all competent forecasters to produce a world in which the majority of human lives will be impoverished, war-torn, exposed to periodic climate-driven disasters and generally blighted, while the other might result in a world where the worst of these consequences have been averted, we *morally ought* to choose the latter, irrespective of which particular individuals will inhabit either scenario.

But it is just this reaction that leads Parfit himself to characterise his insight into the non-identity issue as raising a *problem*. One might, indeed, more grandly designate it a paradox, a situation where something incredible seems logically inescapable. (This is not infrequent in philosophy, of course – the same sort of bind crops up all over the 'problem of free will', for instance.) And it is a problem or paradox specifically for the attempt, which is our general topic in this part of the book, to apply the template of morality to our confrontation with climate and ecological crisis. We seem intuitively to recognise an obligation on present people, acting collectively, to work for a future world in which their descendants enjoy at least tolerable rather than pervasively blighted lives. But, given non-identity, we do not harm anyone by neglecting this obligation, nor do we benefit anyone by fulfilling it – we do not make anyone's life better or worse than it (than *that* particular life) would have been had we collectively acted otherwise than we did, whatever we do, since then *that* life would not have been lived at all. An obligation, however, which we harm no-one by neglecting and help no-one by fulfilling – a duty, in effect, owed to no-one – seems to have lost any kind of force as a moral obligation.

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Parfit himself seeks to navigate this difficulty by appealing in utilitarian style to the thought that we have a general moral obligation to increase as far as possible the aggregated sum of happiness or utility; or, as he puts it, 'If other things are equal, the best outcome is the one in which there would be the greatest quantity of whatever makes life worth living.' (1984: 387) By *best* here he explicitly means

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morally best; and it is certainly the case that we can expect more human lives to be worth living in a less-blighted as compared with a more-blighted future world, even though they will be very largely the lives of different people. Is this enough to rescue the claim that we have moral obligations – to the Universe, perhaps – in this regard? The trouble is that, as he is also honest enough to recognise, attempting to aggregate in this way towards a quantum of ‘whatever makes life worth living’ brings its own deeply counter-intuitive implications. For if *that* is our criterion for the morally best outcome, why are we not morally obliged to consider whether we could produce a world containing teeming billions of people all of whom have lives barely above the level at which they would cease to be worth living? – since the aggregated quantum of ‘worth-livingness’ in such a world might well outweigh through sheer number of lives the barely tolerable quality of each, on the principle (in Parfit’s own words) that ‘the greatest mass of milk might be found in a heap of bottles each containing a single drop’. (1984: 388) But that we could possibly be so obligated is – as he labels it – an utterly repugnant conclusion. It is actually a *reductio ad absurdum* of the whole utilitarian mindset, a more readily imaginable version of Robert Nozick’s ‘utility monster’, the single individual who maximises happiness equally unacceptably by being millions of times happier than the myriads whose happiness is sacrificed to him (Nozick 1974: 41).

Essentially the same point may be put even more starkly in this way. As between world A, containing ten perfectly happy people, and world B which differs from A only in containing a hundred such people instead of ten, what could possibly be the content of a moral obligation to produce B rather than A? For *ex hypothesi* we should make no individual person within either world happier or less happy by our choice. (We might make ourselves happier, in virtue of contemplating the larger number of smiling faces, but that is beside the point – we are asking, of course, how world B could *in itself* be morally preferable to A.) The idea would have to be that we could make the world a happier place by multiplying happy people, rather than by making less happy people happier. When the question whether it could indeed be better – for the Universe? – to contain more rather than fewer happy people (never mind ‘more rather than less happiness’) is thus exposed to the light of our full attention, however, its lack of any real sense becomes unignorable. But it has to make sense, and indeed to be answerable in the affirmative, if our choices between different environmental futures are to be morally governed in the way that Parfit wants to claim, by the comparative quanta of happiness, utility or ‘worth-livingness’ in which they result.

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Over his subsequent attempts to establish some principle inherent in this approach which might rule out the permanent possibility of outweighing loss of life-quality by increase in quantity of lives, we need not linger. For this, on his own showing, would have to involve something like a demonstration that milk stops accumulating when the number of bottles containing single drops of it exceeds a certain figure – and this is just not the sort of manipulation to which the concept of a quantum could lend itself. It is however the direction in which one is forced (as another kind of *reductio*) if one abandons on non-identity grounds the belief that a situation could only be harmful if it involves harm to someone, while trying to retain the notion that our obligation not to produce a blighted future must be a *moral* obligation. Instead, I suggest, the conclusion to draw from the radical contingency of future people's existence which it is Parfit's distinction to have identified – the condition which makes people not yet born insufficiently independent of our present practices and patterns of activity, for the idea of harming them *by* those practices and patterns to get a proper deterrent grip on us – is that our obligation not to blight the future world may not after all be a *moral* one. The question is then, of course, what other kind of obligation it might be.

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One very interesting answer to this question has been proposed by the environmental philosopher and activist Rupert Read.

By way of introducing his argument, we should note that there are two ways in which present people could harm those who will be living in the future, to which the non-identity objection does not apply. The first of these we can dismiss fairly swiftly. If I bury some plutonium or other long-term-toxic substance in my back garden, in a container which will after a while rust away, I shall expose to radiation any people who happen to be around that vicinity in a hundred years or so, but there seems no way in which that particular one-off act of irresponsibility could influence the identities of those people, and so I *should* be making them worse off than they – those very people who end up irradiated – would have been had I refrained. It is only activities and policies with enough scope to intervene also in all the contingencies of procreation, which must mean collective or public activities and policies, that are liable to Parfit's point. (Plutonium, for instance, is an environmental danger because nations have civil nuclear power programmes, which do involve that sort of scope, not because you or I have private stashes of the stuff to dispose of.) Obviously, however – and no doubt luckily – there are very

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few private persons indeed whose individual actions could cause in that kind of way any significant environmental damage. Probably only one or two people with their fingers hovering near nuclear buttons have a choice just as themselves over whether to blight the future world, and about them, we can only pray.

But the other way in which we can genuinely harm future people needs to be taken much more seriously. We can do so through environmentally-damaging activities which are now narrowing the future prospects of very large numbers of people who are already existing – born but not yet out of their cradles, or like my grandchildren, young enough to reach my present age towards the beginning of the twenty-second century. Surely we have obligations not to leave *them*, through our actions either individual or collective, a world to the blighting of which the concept of harm would seem fully to apply, since the existence of those to be rendered worse off is now established and no longer contingent on any policy choices which we might make.

These considerations undoubtedly carry some weight. Their force is mitigated, however, by the fact that, if we are only looking a generation or two ahead, the order of environmental harm which continuing business-as-usual will occasion across that time-frame – the rising sea-levels, more frequent droughts, famines and severe weather events, the sharply reduced biodiversity – although scary enough, comes out as still well this side of catastrophic. It might even be considered as capable of being *offset*, at least to some extent, by the beneficial effects of the things in pursuit of which, as we have already noted, modern civilisation is over-impacting the natural environment: the more widely-extended material prosperity, the reduced child mortality, the high-tech health care, the internet access and so forth – all of which, it might be claimed, are also part of what we are trying to hand on to our grandchildren. Indeed, our children and grandchildren now alive might even be called *complicit* – albeit innocently, at least until they become teenagers capable of understanding what their demands entail – in much of the environmental damage now being done, since many present adults pursue destructive lifestyles, understandably if misguidedly, in part to provide for them. It is only when we look several generations ahead, at the results of by-then runaway global heating, a species holocaust and world-wide ecosystemic collapse once the full self-reinforcing feedback effects from breaching planetary thresholds cut in, that we are confronted with a set of prospective conditions for human life which *no* such benefits could conceivably offset. It is not our grandchildren's life-conditions, but those of their grandchildren, that present habits and policies are incontestably, and (soon, if we do

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not change) irremediably, blighting. And it is the force of recoil from *that* prospect which would be needed for the urgency of harm-avoidance to bite hard enough on present actions to incite changes of the radical nature needed – drastic revision of our mobility and energy usage expectations, our standards of comfort and our dietary habits, at the very least. But the non-identity objection undermines the intelligibility of such a reaction as recoil from distant-future harm.

It is just at this point, however, that Read's argument comes to bear. His case, made in his *Why Climate Breakdown Matters* (2022) and even more sharply in his 2021 book *Parents For a Future*, runs as follows. On reflection, what most of us find we care about most strongly is our own children. This is plausibly true, he points out, even of people who profess to care little or nothing about the general state of the world, or about that of the environment in particular: 'Doesn't everyone, from the most idealistic to the most cynical, concur in profoundly valuing at the very least their own children?' (Read 2021: 42)

But really caring about one's own children, says Read, entails also caring strongly about what they will most strongly care about, which by parity of argument is likely to be *their* children – so we are thereby committed to caring strongly about what *they* in turn will most strongly care about, which, again by parity of argument will be ... and so on. Concern iterating itself or cascading down the generations thus commits us to caring now, as intensely as for our own children and grandchildren alive in the present, for whomever among our (and their) ramifying descendants will be alive when climate breakdown decisively kicks in. And evidently this commitment must go on extending indefinitely into the future when everyone's remote descendants will have interbred across the face of the whole Earth. Hence unless we now do everything we can to oppose the further jeopardising of climate and biospheric stability, which will ensure these future people intolerable life-conditions, we are in effect forswearing care for our own, presently-existing children.

One immediate cavil here which we should simply dismiss is that not everyone has children to care about. Read himself meets this point by claiming that the childless will still care in a quasi-parental sort of way about those in the rising generation nearest to them – nephews and nieces, children of close friends and the like. This is a rather weak response – the childless are often so because they care more about other things than about anyone's children. But that does not matter, since nature will always ensure that the large majority will reproduce, and that is all he really needs to launch his argument.

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Crucially, moreover, the obligation on that large majority to avoid further environmental damage does not turn on any moral duty to minimise harm, nor really on any moral duty at all. Care or love for our children thought of as something which morally *ought* to move us, would be seriously warped and distorted. The parent who loves his or her children as a kind of Kantian requirement (never mind as a way of being virtuous or maximising utility) would be even more spiritually questionable than the cold-hearted person only dutifully benevolent – to the extent, in fact, that *love* would cease to be the right term for whatever emotion was being felt. Real parental love is a natural life-bond or life-charge upon us, not any demand of morality. And Read is contending that implicit in merely that loving is a charge of obligation to precautionary abstinence or withdrawal from all present activities and policies reliably predicted to bring about future climate destabilisation and ecological damage.

Now it is certainly possible to question the logical machinery on which this conception relies. Care iterating itself into the indefinite future is only delivered by the argument if one accepts:

1. that what Read calls the ‘essential life project’ of most people is care for their own children, and
2. that caring for someone in this way entails caring *in the same way* for whoever it is *their* essential life-project to care for,

and both these premises can be challenged with counter-examples. As regards the first, it is not just a matter for empirical doubt whether what most people do value most deeply, as he alternatively puts it, is indeed their own children – that is, whether it is not just the plain fact that many people value at least equally the ‘projects’ represented by their work, their dwelling in a particular place, or their political or faith commitments. More importantly, the idea of an essential life-project must be that of something which gives meaning and point to one’s existence, and there is something *conceptually* hollow about trying to find that in the existence of one’s children. For if the point of my existence lies in nurturing this person, the point of whose existence will then lie in nurturing someone else, the point of whose existence ... and so on, my existence becomes not inescapably engaged with that of my distant descendants, but *pointless*, as its point disappears up its permanently deferred futurity; and correspondingly, making one’s immediate offspring into one’s life-project becomes a surrogate for meaningfulness which can easily endanger both oneself and them. Love, that is, not just for one’s children but

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for anyone, has to be a part of what gives meaning to any normally human life, but it also has to be *only* a part. The Cavalier poet Lovelace, imagining himself bidding farewell to a protesting mistress as he goes off soldiering (Grierson and Bullough 1934: 683), concludes with

I could not love thee (Deare) so much
 Lov'd I not Honour more,

and this has become a trite quotation – but it has done so through expressing a vital truth: love which tends to dominate over all other urgent human concerns is actually impugned *as love*, and on its way to becoming an unhealthy distortion of life.

One might still hope that something like Read's argument could be rescued for loving one's children as one vital element among others in meaningful human life. But the deeper objection is actually to premise (2) above, that such love or care iterates in the same way down the generations. Again, this is not just the empirical point that as a matter of fact I find myself caring deeply for my children while not really giving a hoot about anyone who, from the twenty-second or twenty-third century, might trace their descent back through them to me. The real difficulty is that the premise treats the concept of *care* as univocal, when it is not. This can be illustrated most simply in terms of a different kind of life-project. Suppose that my son is a musician, and absorbed in his work of creating and playing music. I will of course take that work seriously, support him as far as I can, perhaps attend his performances and so on. But I will not care for his music – his music will not matter to me – in the life-organising and meaning-sustaining way that it matters to him. (I may not even much *like* it – or at any rate, I may have to work hard to get myself to appreciate it.) The point is that, in the nature of persons and life-projects, no-one else's life-project *can* matter to me in the way it does to them, however much that person matters to me. So, similarly, if I care deeply for my daughter, her caring deeply for her children will also be something about which I care, and in a way which could fairly be called deep, but it will not impact or absorb me with that uniquely immediate kind of concern which characterises being a parent. The abatement in intensity of caring as one proceeds down the generations is not merely an empirical, but a logical point. That is,

- i. I care deeply about X
- ii. X cares deeply about Y
- iii. I care deeply about what X cares deeply about

do *not* together entail

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iv. I care deeply about Y

because ‘caring deeply about’ subtly shifts its sense between (ii) and its first appearance in (iii), so that to accept the entailment would be to commit the fallacy of equivocation. Thus Read’s transgenerational iteration of parental caring never really gets started.

None of this, however, should detract from the force of the underlying recognition here, that ‘one can only properly love and care for one’s children by extending to one’s grandchildren the opportunity to flourish’ (Read 2021: 57). His specific argument for this conclusion may fail, but the point itself remains compelling, not least through its shocking corollary: the disaster of climate breakdown is *hitting us now*, not just through early-warning floods and wildfires, but much more dangerously through the intimate wrenching awry of this most fundamental of our human relationships. That increasing numbers of the rising generation feel anxious about or even deterred from having children of their own because of the climatically and ecologically destabilised future awaiting these potential offspring, is at least as grievous an offence against life as anything humans are doing to the prospects for other species, and it is one that we are already fully engaged in committing. If we cannot bring up our children to trust in their own growing up, and that of those for whom they will care, into an enduringly habitable world, we as well as they are vitally impaired as human beings. Such damage can only be palliated and such trust revived by our acting as vigorously and urgently as we can towards making our collective prospects less appalling.

But if our obligation to do this is not one which we have to future people not to harm them, and nor can it plausibly be represented as the same kind of obligation to nurture and care for them as we have towards our own children, we come back to my question at the end of the previous section: what kind of obligation actually is it?

Intergenerationality and life-responsibility

It may help us in getting a cross-bearing on this question, as well as a concluding overview of the foregoing discussion, if we consider briefly how the Israeli philosopher Avner de-Shalit tries to ground our obligations to future people in the idea of a ‘transgenerational community’. His argument is that genuine communities, those which are importantly constitutive of the identities of their members, are

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transgenerational insofar as they always involve living continuities of concern and valuation out of the past and into the future. And then

if one accepts the idea of a community in one generation, including the principle that this entails certain obligations to other members, then one should accept the idea of a transgenerational community extending into the future, hence recognising obligations to future generations ... just as many people think of the past as part of what constitutes their 'selves', they do and should regard the future as part of their 'selves'... (de-Shalit 1995: 57)

But the notion of obligation is that of rational bindingness, which in turn implies mutually agreed norms of value, and because the way presently-existing people agree such norms among themselves is significantly unlike the way in which they are in normative communication with both the past and the future, *obligation* cannot simply be used like this as though it could retain the same sense in each of these relations. It is inherent in the idea of tradition that, although we project our values forward, we cannot determine how they will be interpreted and developed by our successors, any more than our own development of what we received out of the past was determined. Tradition lives only in present creative engagement with values and ideas out of the past, undertaken with an eye open towards the future. Putting this another way: the dealings with the future that transgenerational community involves are not, and cannot be, present-with-future-*person* dealings on the model of the present-with-present-person dealings which can yield rationally binding shared norms. Misrepresenting them as if they were – as if the future population of Britain, say, were 'members of the British community' in essentially the same way as the present population of Birmingham are – can lead only to the erection of pseudo-obligations which, because only we present people can stipulate them, only constrain us as far as we are prepared to be constrained.

Pace de-Shalit, that is, we should not think of a transgenerational community as one having (tenselessly) members alive in the past and future as well as in the present. Rather, we should see it as a community always only there in an ongoing present, but in a way that is livingly responsive to its traditions and continuously shaping its future creatively out of its past. By the same token, the real relations of present people to those who will come after them should be understood to consist not in harmful, beneficial or caring interactions of the kind which those already existing can have with one another, but in the *depth of intergenerationality* with which those present relations, and particularly those between adults and the rising generation, are conducted. Correspondingly, what both Parfit and Read

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misconceive as obligations, whether of problematic harm-avoidance, of utility-maximisation or of caring, to future people, are really obligations to act among our present selves in a spirit of responsibility towards the inherent ongoingness or creative self-sustainability of life. They are obligations to live today so that, knowing what we now know, we do not knowingly jeopardise the habitability of any tomorrow. This shift in perspective does not just come down to an alternative way of talking about the same thing. Very importantly, it makes our relevant obligations dramatically more stringent. For seeing ourselves as having moral or caring obligations towards future people must involve offsetting such obligations against the equivalent obligations which we must also recognise towards present people – so that, for instance, we mandate ourselves with the kind of gently gradualist transition away from fossil fuels which in practice readily becomes the indefinite deferral of any sharply uncomfortable change. But an obligation of life-responsibility, taken seriously, would seem to mandate our simply ceasing, in very short order and at whatever cost, to live in ways that jeopardise the viability of planetary life. It is an obligation to be genuinely precautionary – so to act, that where there is a risk of life-catastrophe, however small, we simply do not run it, rather than trying to run it more circumspectly. (The difference, we might say, is that between ‘net zero by 2050 (if we can...)’ and ‘just stop oil’.) And insofar as this is a person-involving obligation at all, it is an obligation to let no merely moral or caring obligation to present persons – the only such obligations under which we can really lie – override that kind of responsibility to life itself.

Its having implications this drastic clearly means that we must give careful and critical attention to the idea of life-responsibility – in particular, to how such responsibility could be grounded in the relations between humanity and the rest of nature, and to what could be the criteria for properly discharging it. We shall address these demands in later parts of the book. In the meanwhile, we need to consider an alternative proposal for retaining our obligations to future people within the realm of morality: that is, the suggestion that these obligations are not after all fundamentally about protecting them from harm or nurturing them, but about treating them fairly or *justly*. To these considerations we turn next.

❧ Chapter 4 ❧

Treating Future People Fairly?

If we cannot bring the force of morality to bear on environmentally damaging present actions through the concept of obligation not to harm future people, can we do so through that of justice or injustice towards them?

One thing to note immediately is that this approach would seem to dodge the issues of contingency with which we were entangled in the previous chapter. Harm can only get lodgement, as it were, on actual people – you can't *hurt* a possible person any more than you can get drunk on possible wine – and it is their needing, before they can be harmed, to have become actual through the contingencies involved in activities prior to their existence which interferes, if we credit Parfit, with *the worse-off-than-otherwise* logic defining harm. But you can treat possible people unfairly: if I steal a library book, for instance, I act unfairly towards whoever might subsequently need to read it but finds it missing, and I have still acted unfairly even if nobody in the event actually does subsequently need to read it, so that I have only cheated or disrespected possible people.

By the same token, then, we ought to be able to say that if leaving future people a ravaged planet is doing them an injustice, that will still characterise our present actions whoever those people turn out to be. For injustice doesn't consist in making a particular someone worse off (or in some cases of injustice, better off) than he or she would have been otherwise; it consists in acting in ways which anyone relevantly placed would have a right or claim against us that we not so act. That kind of generality is inherent in such claims: a right to be treated in a certain way belongs to anyone who fills the relevant bill. (For example, *whoever* is born in Britain to British parents has a right to British citizenship – we do not here refer to any enumerable totality of actual people, but to all the possible people who would qualify.) And surely, if we party now with the planet's biosystems and leave future people to struggle with the mess, we are treating them as they have a right not to be treated, whoever they turn out to be (and even when they wouldn't have been those particular people had we not so acted).

Equally, there cannot arise any sort of collective-action difficulties over injustice. These difficulties attend situations where harm done by some group is built up out of multiple, in themselves effectively harmless, actions. But injustice, or acting

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unfairly, is a matter of one's attitude to other people, of regarding them or treating them as if they did not deserve the same consideration as oneself, or were merely instrumental in some way to one's purposes. What is wrong with free-riding, in this light, is wrong quite irrespective of the negligible causal effect which my adding an extra beast to the common would have as long as everyone else is observing the rule not to do so – the wrong consists precisely in my wilfully breaking that rule, and thereby treating the others with the disrespect that goes with always regarding myself as an exception and a special case. And if I have that sort of attitude, it is already morally incumbent on me to do something about it – no question arises of totting up lots of surrounding people's attitudes until moral consideration cuts in, as with the cumulative nature of damage through collective action.

As to the bite on present actions of this way of framing the issues, it is evident that, while the moral phenomenology may be different, many people experience as least as strong a reluctance to behave unjustly as to do harm to others. Stealing the library book may not harm anyone specific if no-one misses it, but it involves defrauding the system, and if the recoil one has from doing that is not quite the same instinctive gut-level flinching as from directly harming another, it seems nevertheless to reach as deep or even deeper into one's sense of self – a recoil from being, or from having to recognise oneself as being, a certain kind of person. ('I don't want to be someone who could do *that!*') The *oughts* and *ought nots* around justice are at least as imperious, to recall Darwin's term, as those around harm and its avoidance.

Sustainability as justice

So, putting the appeal to justice in the terms of a broad sustainability constraint, one might suggest that each generation has a claim of justice to be handed on a world at least as habitable, at least as capable of supporting flourishing human lives, as its predecessor generation received.

The reason underpinning that claim is the injustice of discriminating against the future on the irrelevant ground that it *is* (now) the future – because how could merely where you happen to come in the passage of time be relevant to your need to enjoy the conditions for a flourishing human life? Classic cases of injustice such as racism, sexism or ageism arise when we subject somebody, typically in pursuit of our own advantage, to differential and generally less favourable treatment on grounds irrelevant to their being so treated. Differential treatment on relevant grounds, of course, need not be unfair – if you get imprisoned and others do not,

Sustainability as justice

you receive differentially unfavourable treatment, but if that is because you robbed the sub-post-office and they didn't, no question of injustice need arise. But if you are imprisoned because the judge disliked your face, or just the colour of your face, that clearly is unjust – since your mere physiognomy is always irrelevant to whether you personally ought or ought not to be at large. Preventing future people from enjoying the conditions of normal human flourishing, or even from having a habitable planet, merely on the irrelevant grounds that they come after us in the sequence of generations, would be a comparable injustice – *presentism*, we might analogously call it. The claim of future people to be treated on the same footing as if they were here and now deserving the same consideration as other present people would then be being overlooked just because they are future and we can get away with it.

(Of course, we do not actually *say* 'We'll leave them an uninhabitable planet because we're enjoying wrecking it and they aren't around to stop us', which would be just too blatant; but we overlook their claim to the appropriate consideration because their futurity screens them off, as it were, from recognition of it – just as the prejudiced person discriminates by failing to see through people's blackness or agedness or whatever, to their human status as having an equal claim on his or her regard. We frequently allow the distancing and differentiating effect of irrelevant considerations to prompt our behaviour in practice. Basically, this is breaking the Golden Rule: we treat future people in a way we should not want to have been treated by *our* predecessor generations. The characteristic flaw that lies at the root of all unjust behaviour is failing to put oneself in the other person's shoes, as we see clearly with ordinary discriminatory practice – those who engage in this are failing to ask: 'How would *I* feel about it if I were a black person, or a woman, or...?')

So future people would seem to have a general claim of justice on present people to act towards them as maintaining planetary habitability would require – a claim not to be treated as if the conditions of their world mattered less than those of ours – and we have towards them correspondingly a *prima facie* obligation of justice: not to hand on a ravaged planet. And if such an obligation of justice or fairness towards the future falls on present people generally, then it would seem that an obligation falls on each of us individually to do our fair share towards meeting that general obligation. Here again the ability to identify the carbon or ecological consequences (rather than 'footprint') of one's actions becomes important. For suppose, as Mike Berners-Lee suggests in the book cited in Chapter 1, that a lifestyle generating a maximum five tonnes annually of CO₂ equivalent is one that it would

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be fair to the future for everyone in the West now to adopt. Then if you are already substantially over that quota because you take a couple of long-haul holiday flights a year, drive an SUV, live in a mansion or use up the unrecycled toilet-roll as if there were no tomorrow, you are in fairness going to have some cutting back to do.

If your carbon contribution is to matter morally, in other words, then as we have already seen that can't be because it is harmfully large – it is neither large enough to do any trackable damage in itself, nor does it contribute to emissions from a pattern of living capable of genuinely harming future people whose existence is contingent on it – but only because it is *unfairly*, that is unjustly, large. It could be so as against the sort of quota just glanced at, or as against your fair share of a reduction in the emissions of some group of which you are a member – say, national emissions. Or it could be too large as compared directly with, say, your individual fair share of the world's remaining notional carbon budget for keeping global warming within 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. Or, which comes to the same thing, it could be too large compared with what each present human being can fairly emit from now on if there is to be a habitable world for future generations. (For some very poor people, mainly in Africa, that would mean their emitting *more* than they currently do, but for all of us in the West, very much not.) On any of these ways of thinking about it, your obligation to cut back would derive ultimately from an obligation on present people generally to act justly towards future people.

Impartiality towards the future

But such a derived or referred individual obligation of justice, as we might call it, will only fall on you if there *is* an obligation of justice on present people generally not to behave unsustainably. And here comes a difficulty. For while there does seem a clear enough case in principle for not handing on a ravaged or seriously degraded planetary environment, the question is how far that requirement can be brought to bear on particular actions and policies. For 'handing on a ravaged planet' is not something which anyone ever does as such; what we actually do is only ever a selection of things that may or may not contribute to that consequence, in a greater or lesser degree depending on a huge variety of factors. But the need to assess these particular activities in the light of their justice or injustice towards future people raises the key issue of impartiality.

To illustrate how it does so, consider an ordinary obligation of fairness. Suppose I borrow your (non-waterproof) mobile phone and accidentally drop it in the bath. Fair dealing – justice, if that did not sound rather too pompous a term

Impartiality towards the future

in this connection – requires that I restore you like for like, which means buying you a replacement one. But suppose that particular brand of phone is no longer available; the question is then what is going to count as like for like, that is, as a fair replacement. Now if only *I* got to decide this, with my obvious incentive to favour the cheaper end of the market, that would plainly be unfair. But nor of course would it be fair if only you, potentially seizing on this happy chance to upgrade, got to decide. For the idea of a fair replacement to get any purchase here, we have to appeal to what anyone reasonable coming to this *impartially* would judge to be such, where ‘coming to it impartially’ means considering the matter as someone non-partisan, someone on neither your side nor mine, that is as someone disinterested as regards this particular matter. (In practice, if we failed to agree on what an imagined such person would say, we would probably identify an actual such person and ask him or her.)

The underlying idea here is that justification for an action must involve informed and unforced (that is, properly impartial) agreement to the effect that there is good reason for that action. This is the leading idea in, for instance, Scanlon’s contractualism (see Scanlon 1998), but it is really a quite general and intuitive thought for morality: if we are to treat others as we should wish them to treat us, in the way that the Golden Rule stipulates, the reasons for our actions can’t be *just ours*, as it were – acceptably plausible only to us – but must be such as anyone affected by such action could reasonably be expected to accept.

But now consider the sort of judgement we have to make when we are attempting in practice to act fairly towards the future. We might think for example: ‘We’ll maintain our present high-carbon lifestyles, with all the associated benefits which future people will of course inherit, but at the same time we’ll rely on as-yet-unproven carbon-capture technologies being rolled out at scale in time to prevent this from wrecking the planet further down the line.’ Or perhaps: ‘We’ll keep on relying on using an abundance of electrical energy, and pass on to future people an infrastructure built wholly around that reliance, along with a power grid which depends on having covered every hill in sight with wind turbines.’ Here, too, it seems that if only we, that is, present people, get to decide whether those actions or policies were indeed to count as treating future people fairly, that wouldn’t be fair – and for just the same reason as in the phone replacement case: present people, perhaps looking to find ways of continuing present lifestyles relatively undisturbed, are obviously interested parties. *But the idea of an appeal instead to an impartial, disinterested judgement has no purchase in this situation.* There can be

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no-one disinterested as regards any matter potentially in dispute between present and future people, because there is no third position between present existence and non-existence; thus anyone able to take a view will necessarily be coming at the question from one side only.

That does not of course mean that we cannot step back from our immediate involvement, our actual present concerns and impulses in relation to such decisions, and try to govern our actions by some sense of what future people could reasonably expect from us. This can certainly be done, and done in a serious attempt to take, as it were, a back-bearing from the future on present conduct. We can try to act responsibly towards future generations by making thoughtful judgements about, for instance, how much loss of the natural world they might be likely to see as a fair exchange for how much enhanced technological capacity. Nor need there be anything casual or perfunctory about this – we can really try to see such matters from their perspective. But we are, too, necessarily the only judges of how far we have succeeded. And holding oneself to account in this way isn't being held impartially to account, any more than locking oneself in a room and pocketing the key is imprisoning oneself, however firmly one intends to stay put. There is no way in which the basic judgements of the human present can be challenged here, except by present humans. But, if that is the case, then there can be no genuine impartiality in the frame. And then the question cannot be avoided, whether fair dealing with the future over the requirements for handing on a habitable planet is actually possible at all.

Nor is there any escape from this doubt in supposing, as some otherwise insightful writers in this field have rather surprisingly done, that we can appoint Guardians or Representatives or similar, to speak on behalf of future people in such cases, so that the future can after all have a real countervailing voice in these judgements and decisions and in negotiating what might be found reasonably acceptable by all involved (see for instance Read 2012). We can indeed appoint such officials, and *we* – that is, present people – must also decide when they get to speak, within what kind of institutional arrangements they must work, and just how much attention we are going to be prepared to pay them. Such an elaborate charade does not avoid the difficulties over genuine impartiality which I have been outlining – it merely makes them more glaring.

Sustainability and natural capital

Sustainability and natural capital

In case this should sound like a rather abstract kind of objection, let us consider how it impacts on a very practical application of the idea of sustainability as justice – that articulated through the economic concept of natural capital. That concept represents the sustainability constraint by picturing the environment’s enabling and supporting functions in relation to human activities as a form of capital stock, or set of capital assets providing us with a flow of benefits. The preservation of this stock into the future at levels which will yield an undiminished such flow, is then what the sustainability constraint enjoins as a matter of our behaving justly towards future generations.

Why might this approach seem appealing? Suppose we are contemplating a development that carries a risk of chemical pollution to soils and associated ecosystems in the future. On the natural capital model, we think of forgoing the present benefits of this development not negatively as a cost, but positively, as a form of investment in preserving the capacities of soil and ecosystem for ongoing use. This way of picturing the process has the advantage of placing the enabling and supporting capacities of environmental systems centre-stage, and thus emphasising our ongoing dependence on them. Keeping within natural limits becomes a matter of obeying the sustainability requirement of handing on the value of our stock of natural assets undiminished by trespassing over those limits.

It is important to be clear about how this ‘capital’ model works. Capital is, by definition (see any economics primer), an asset used but not used up in the productive process, which has the characteristic of yielding a flow of income or some other benefit over time, valued at any moment as the net present value of this flow. Classically this meant things like machinery – for example a tractor, the capital value of which being that of the agricultural work which could not be done without it. But then, according to Dieter Helm, Chair of the UK’s Natural Capital Committee from 2012 to 2020, *natural* capital is constituted in a thematic extension of this idea by

elements of nature [which] directly or indirectly produce value to people, and can be broken down into ecosystems, species, freshwater, land, minerals, the air and oceans, as well as natural processes and functions. (Helm 2015: 2)

The notion that not only raw materials such as mineral stocks, but also ecosystems and natural areas in general, could helpfully be thought of as natural

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capital assets, first took hold in the 1970s and was intended to promote conservation, then becoming increasingly topical, as a specific way of ceasing to treat these stocks and systems in economic modelling as indefinitely available free goods. The transference of the capital concept into this sphere is metaphorical because, standardly and classically, capital items like machinery and buildings are human-made, which natural inputs to the process by definition are not. It offers nonetheless a way to give environmental considerations purchase in a culture where economic and accounting concerns, the claims of the bottom line, carry great weight. The environmental campaigner Tony Juniper (current Chair of Natural England) has indeed suggested that putting this metaphor to work is a way of 'reconnecting people with the reality which we inhabit'.¹ Where what matters is alerting decision-makers to the fact that natural systems are not just there to soak up our externalities but make positive contributions to human wellbeing, this may well be justifiable. It is easy, for instance, to overlook the vital importance of the complicated ecosystem which is the ordinary soil beneath our feet. The 'services' it provides include water retention, carbon absorption and nutrient recycling, and even the crudest attempt to cost these services will serve to emphasise that its purely economic value is likely to exceed significantly that to be realised through market-priced activities such as concreting over it or compacting and eroding it by destructive industrial farming methods. Indeed, as Helm says, 'by viewing the environment as made-up of natural capital, it takes its place alongside man-made capital and human capital. It is integrated into the fabric of the economy, not a second class add-on.' (Helm 2015: 6)

But this 'integration into the fabric of the economy' brings its own difficulties, as the summary in Figure 3, adapted from Barbier and Markandya's *New Blueprint for a Green Economy* (2013), suggests:

1. See <https://naturalcapitalcoalition.org/tony-juniper-talks-natural-capital-at-harmony-in-food-and-farming-conference-2017-video/> (accessed 24 April 2018).

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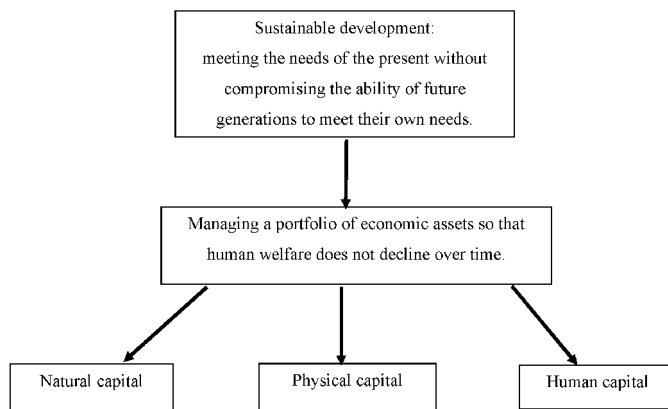


Figure 3. Capital and sustainable development.

Here physical capital, the original standard kind, includes buildings and equipment and the like, maintained by investment in repair and renewal as necessary. So-called ‘human capital’ means knowledge and skills relevant to the productive process, maintained by investment in educational arrangements, management systems and so forth; these two categories are often taken together as ‘human-made capital’. And then the question arises, how far we are to take these three different forms of capital asset as inter-substitutable? – how far we can do with less of one kind if we have correspondingly more of another?

Historically, humans have always produced things for themselves through interaction with natural systems and resources, and this interaction has frequently involved the introduction of improved machinery and new technologies (‘human-made capital’) either to enhance or to substitute for the powers of the natural systems themselves to yield a flow of benefits. For example, development of more effective ploughs did not need to add more actual acres of arable soil (although it may have extended cultivation into some hitherto unploughable areas), in order to increase the growing capacity of what was already there, by turning it over more effectively – which in economic terms was to increase the *capital value* of the soil systems involved in enabling the cropland to produce, recover and reproduce. Again, when soil capacities started to be depleted by over-intensive cultivation, along came more human-made capital in the form of artificial fertilisers, to substitute for the failing self-regenerative powers of the natural asset and again to preserve, or even enhance, its capital value.

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The associated *conceptual* point is that once it is regarded in this economist's way as a capital asset, a natural resource is treated as having the value of the flow of benefit (to humans) which it yields. But, if the value of something is that of the benefits which it yields, it *must* be replaceable or substitutable by anything which yields benefits of an equal value – since you can't consistently take the function of something to be the production of benefits, while denying that it could be substituted for by anything else that would produce the same benefits just as effectively.

But there are obvious dangers when this model is transferred to environmental features. Artificially fertilised soil, for instance, may have the same or indeed a higher capital value considered just as cropland – but what about the wildflowers, and the insects which soils support, and the bird life which the insects support, and the whole bio-systemic network of which cultivated soil still forms such an important part? Are we to factor in loss of or harm to all these things from chemical fertilisation as costs? But then some of them we only understand very imperfectly, never mind being able to value them so that we could net their loss off the potential market value of the boosted crops and so factor in their importance. So maybe we should not think of chemically fertilised soil as a substitute across the board for soil which (along with sensible crop rotation and animal manure) naturally renews itself. Maybe safety lies instead in insisting on keeping at least some such soil unenhanced or unsubstituted. And a generalisation of this argument produces the idea of *critical* natural capital (Ekins et al. 2003): natural elements, in particular those like rainforests or groundwater flows with major ecosystem support functions, or the extent of sea-ice the albedo of which has planet-cooling functions, all of which it would probably be safest to preserve just as themselves, without trying to calculate how far man-made systems could replace them. 'Safest' in this context, one should recall, means likeliest to meet the requirements of justice by handing on an undiminished stock of natural capital assets to the next generation.

Critical decisions

The issue here is between two approaches which have been dubbed respectively *weak* and *strong* sustainability. Weak sustainability is defined as the position that there is no objection to depleting natural capital assets over time so long as these can be substituted for by human-made capital (as for example, natural biological productivity by genetically modified organisms, or the CO₂-absorptive capacities of the atmosphere by carbon capture and storage systems) in order to maintain future benefit flows at present values (or better). Strong sustainability, by intended

Critical decisions

contrast, grounds a predisposition against depleting natural capital precisely on the fact that a good deal of it is *not* effectively substitutable by any such human-made alternatives. As Barbier and Markandya (2013: 42) put it:

We cannot always substitute for natural capital, as uncertainty over current and future values of ecological goods and services, unique environments and biodiversity mean that some natural capital is essential and cannot be replaced ... Sustainability requires maintaining and enhancing the value of the aggregate capital stock, and preserving essential natural capital.

Such non-substitutable natural assets are then claimed to constitute critical natural capital. The practical policy difference here is supposed to lie between an approach favouring careful and appropriate development, in the course of which natural capital assets may be reduced or downgraded provided overall benefits (to human beings) are maintained or enhanced, and one favouring robust protection of at least the critical component of such assets. (The latter approach will also strongly favour precaution, on the basis that ecosystemic complexity entails our often not knowing in advance which natural capital elements *are* critical.)

As the philosopher Alan Holland pointed out when this distinction was first being canvassed, however, there is rather less to it than meets the eye (Holland 1997). Weak sustainability is the claim that the various forms of capital may be inter-substituted where this enhances or at least preserves the value of the benefit flows. But strong sustainability actually says just the same thing, with a slightly different emphasis. That we cannot preserve benefit flows by substitution where there are as a matter of fact no adequate human-made substitutes available is not only not incompatible with weak sustainability, it is actually a corollary of it. The proponents of strong sustainability evidently wanted to capture the thought that some of the natural world should be protected *as such* – it is not that there just happen not to be, but that there *could not* be, any human-made substitutes for it. But once we have a capital assets model for the natural world at all, there can be no objection in principle to substitution going through where it can – since, as noted just now, if the point of something is the production of benefits, anything else which would produce the same benefits just as effectively must count as a substitute for it.

I have drawn attention to this point of Holland's already in earlier work (see Foster 2018). As I also emphasised there, this implication of our deploying the capital metaphor has significant practical consequences. For it offers nothing to inhibit a policy of replacing natural by human-made capital as far as our tech-

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nological ingenuity allows, so long as we can persuade ourselves that substitution and not derogation is what is really going on. The invocation of criticality was supposed to underline the point that we have to provide a robust ground for not further interfering with life-support systems like the soil or the atmosphere. But, when we start thinking of nature as capital, it will always become an empirically open question whether we can effectively substitute human-made capital for those of its key functions in providing future benefit streams which are at any moment at stake. The key point is then that, under pressure of present needs and the standing collective-action disincentive to uncomfortable change, we will always be disposed to assume answers to that question which will favour our continuing in the immediate future to degrade the natural systems. So we will go on soaking the soil in chemicals and, in the same spirit, we will go on emitting CO₂ vastly in excess of what the 1.5°C threshold for preventing disastrous global warming would demand, and even drilling for yet more carbon-based fuel, while pinning our hopes on the very largely untested techno-possibilities of carbon capture, or nuclear power, or geoeengineering the atmosphere – that is, of substituting human-made for natural capital, with all the rich potential of these and similar technologies for unforeseen side-effects and irreversible ecosystemic damage. The model of ecosystems and other natural resources as capital assets provides us with effectively nothing to restrain these tendencies.

But that model, we should recall, was introduced to serve a conception of intergenerational justice. Environmental features were to be envisaged in this way in order to give practical content to the idea of treating future people fairly, by handing on to them an undiminished capital stock for the production of the same level of benefits as present people enjoy. The question of which natural capital elements might be critical and unsubstitutable within this total ‘asset portfolio’ is then the crucial question of what is to *count* as ‘undiminished’ here. And just as with our example of the phone dropped in the bath, this would have to be something adjudged impartially as between the parties – present and future people – whose interests are involved, if the notion of a fair or just assessment were to be applicable at all. What we see, however, in the process just described is what cannot help being the case: present people making the relevant decisions on behalf of future people, and doing so in ways that reflect the inevitable pressures of their own present interests and concerns.

This close consonance of practical failure with deep conceptual difficulties should perhaps convince us that the requirements of justice towards future people,

Environmental justice now?

while appearing to make sound moral sense in theory, can never actually be met.

Environmental justice now?

If that were so, it might not exhaust the possibilities for moralising environmental responsibility in terms of justice or fairness. Relations between present and future generations do not constitute the only context in which that idea has been brought into play. Another model on which environmental responsibility might be claimed to be an obligation of justice tries to make it into an *intragenerational* rather than an intergenerational matter. So, consider for instance the idea that your present levels of carbon emissions or resource consumption are unjust because you are enjoying them as the beneficiary of a civilisation with historic responsibility, through the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent development of a global fossil-fuel economy, for pressure on ecosystems worldwide and sea-level rises now threatening the livelihoods of people in low-lying Pacific Island states and elsewhere, places with historically a very low carbon contribution or environmental impact. You owe these people, it is argued – people who are not future and voiceless, but present, vocal and vigorously pursuing their claims – a duty to move, along with everyone else in the West, to a much more slimmed-down lifestyle, so that the civilisation which has destabilised the global environment can now make over to them, and to others threatened with climate-driven damage, a huge fund for mitigation and adaptation – a fund which might be thought of not as aid or charity but as a form of reparations such as would be due after an unjust war.

This all sounds persuasive enough if one says it quickly, but the prospect of operationalising it opens up a large can of worms. On whom exactly does this duty of justice devolve, and why? On governments, as currently representative of the countries which have done the damage? – but they did not authorise its launching, even if they authorise its continuance, and moreover they only have funds to transfer by extracting them, directly or indirectly, from you and me. On corporations, which go on making obscene profits out of the consumerism which drives the warming? – but they only do so because huge numbers of people worldwide (including some inhabitants of threatened areas) fall for their marketing and buy, or aspire to buy, their products. Or on you and me, as individual Western consumers and taxpayers? But can you really, in *justice*, be held accountable for the actions of your forebears in pursuing the industrialisation and initiating the fossil-fuel dependence which in their times, before global warming was even a gleam in the

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eye of its early scientific proponents such as Svante Arrhenius, were universally acclaimed as progressive and benevolent developments?

The general difficulty here is that, while the idea of justice as between present and future generations appears straightforward – we leave them enough for as good a life as ours has been – but cannot be implemented because the impartiality requirement can never genuinely be met, justice among people alive today faces no such conceptual barrier to implementation but is so far from being straightforward as to be almost indefinitely contestable. Should we be aiming at an equal distribution of resources to meet environmental challenges? Or at the identification of historical responsibility? Or at everyone getting their environmental due? (And how might *that* be determined?) It is no accident that wrangles over such matters at United Nations conferences have been long protracted and remain unresolved. It is reasonable to conclude that claims of intragenerational environmental justice will always involve simply too much contestability to get any effective grip on the environmentally damaging practices and lifestyles that need altering.

Of course, none of this is to deny that rich countries may have obligations of simple decency towards places and populations threatened with climate-driven disaster, and individual citizens may have corresponding obligations to play their part in ensuring that their governments act decently. This is obviously not a negligible requirement. But equally – and this is really the key point – it is not the *kind* of requirement for which we should surely be looking here. Intuitively, our climate-related obligations should reach *deeper* than a duty of general benevolence, particular mitigation, funded adaptation or cooperative firefighting when disasters actually arrive. Intuitively, they should reach at least as deep as the claims of justice are supposed to reach – they should be radically and inescapably binding on us as human agents.

And what if we try to retain climate and ecological responsibility as an issue of intergenerational justice, but as between *presently-existing* generations? Certainly the school strikers have a potent rhetorical point when they accuse those currently in positions of power and influence of not doing anything like enough to ensure that the planet will not have descended into climate-driven chaos by the sixties and seventies of this century when they in their turn will be middle-aged. The young are, of course, often quite right to excoriate their elders – but in this case, at any rate, things are not clear-cut. After all, as we noted in the previous chapter, many of their elders have got themselves entangled in emissions-heavy lifestyles in large part to provide for, bring up and launch the young, who actually themselves (when

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you observe them walking around everywhere with their eyes glued to their smart-phones) do not seem characteristically liberated from destructive consumerism. The young in the advanced West and North, to put it bluntly, are not sufficiently distinct, as putative victims of supposed environmental injustice, from the supposed perpetrators. And the whole problem with obligations of justice, as both this and my previous examples emphasise, is that to get any real purchase on action they have to be owed by some clearly-defined agent or constituency of agents, who are behaving or in danger of behaving unjustly, to some other equally clearly-defined group who risk being done out of something to which they are entitled, and who have a corresponding claim to a hearing on how this is to be avoided. That template just fails to fit the case of climate and ecological responsibility as between presently co-existing generations.

So if your responsibility to cut your carbon emissions, reduce your ecological impact and reshape your lifestyle accordingly is not a matter of justice arising in any of these ways, of what *is* it a matter? For that we do wrong by complicity in a way of living which is laying waste to life on Earth should, for all I have said so far, remain starkly evident. But since you do not harm anyone or anything specific by your emissions and nor do you owe or share in owing to any person or group a genuine or incontestable duty of justice to mend your ways, it remains an open question what sort of obligation you do have, to what you owe it, and what sort of wrong is involved in neglecting it.

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We can begin to move towards an answer to that question through considering what is perhaps the deepest sense in which environmental responsibility is misconstrued when it is represented as an obligation of justice to future people. Any such future-facing obligation insists on being framed as a matter of the equitable allocation, as between us and them, of the stock of ongoing resources of which we currently stand possessed. That is simply because no other sense in which obligations of justice can be supposed to hold could apply to the future-generational case. We cannot act unjustly towards future people by denying them what they deserve, in situations where no distributional issue is involved, as when, for instance, we unjustly deny someone something earned on merit, because future people are not yet around to have deserved anything in this way. Similarly, we cannot unjustly overrule their rights in any non-distributional particular, as we can those of presently-existing people – say, to life, liberty and freedom of expression – because they do not yet

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hold such rights, which they could only inherit by coming into existence. Nor can we treat future people unjustly by breaking faith with them, since, for the same kind of reason, we can have entered into no engagements with them – except that, implied in intergenerationality, of handing on to them a sufficient patrimony, which comes back to the equitable sharing of resources over time. Hence the very idea of justice towards future people entails that our field for the exercise of this virtue can only be that of comparative resource allocation.

A corollary of that entailment is that any idea of future-facing environmental justice must impose a resource model on our conception of environmental goods. This is clear from the way in which it compels us to think even of those goods which lend themselves least readily to such a model. Natural beauty, for instance, is a good derived from our surroundings not as any quantifiable increment of benefit, for which some equivalent benefit-flow might be substituted, but as an irreplaceable form of experience inherently valuable in itself – and there is a clear sense in which part of our environmental responsibility is indeed not wantonly to diminish the inherent loveliness of the world. But we cannot think of this in terms of future people's having a right directly to an equally beautiful world. Even were the idea of a right to beauty less tendentious, 'equally beautiful' cannot simply mean 'unchanged', and we know that standards of beauty too are liable to change. Thus, the only way to bring our responsibility here within the scope of an obligation of justice to future people is to think of our having a duty to leave them surroundings which will, in their aesthetic aspect, benefit them at least as much as they presently benefit us. In other words, the picture of the natural world as a capital stock, the point of which is the flow of benefit which it supports, falls quite thematically out of the conception of our environmental obligation to the future as one of justice.

But that picture, for all its practical usefulness in enabling us to focus on particular kinds of 'ecosystem service' such as those provided by the soil or woodland cover or bees, fundamentally misrepresents the general relation between humanity and its natural situatedness. For whether or not and to whatever extent supplemented by our technical ingenuity, the background natural affordances which have (hitherto) framed the human habitability of the planet, and which must be preserved functionally intact for future generations if anything must – the suite of predictable seasons, the endurable temperature range, the hydrological cycle yielding plentiful fresh water, the abundance of protein in animal and vegetable forms – simply cannot be coherently represented as any kind of capital stock. This is because they cannot be thought of as *good for humans*, any more than it can be

Misunderstanding ourselves

a good thing for you that you are embodied. You aren't better off embodied than you would be otherwise (than *who* would be otherwise?). The natural affordance of human embodiment matters not just *to* you but *as constitutive* of you, and in the same way all those earthly affordances which make human life possible matter as constitutive of our species being. Without the conditions of environmental and climatic stability on which the human form of life relies, we would not be worse off, because *we* would not be around, as that form of life, at all. But as we have already noted in several related contexts, any kind of benefit by definition makes its recipient better off; so background natural systems cannot be providing humanity with a flow of benefits; so they cannot sensibly be modelled as any kind of capital asset. Picturing Earth systems as natural capital seems in this light to make about as much sense as it would for you to think of your body as 'corporeal capital', something providing an important flow of asset value to support your engagement in football, sex, knitting or whatever other activity you might prefer.

The capital model, in fact, gets our underlying relation to the natural world exactly the wrong way round. Considered as a complex of physical and biological affordances, that natural world is something on which we wholly depend. But considered as a set of capital assets, which for economic assessment exist only as the *value* of the various resources and ecosystem services which they provide, it turns into something which depends on us – in particular, on how we manage what Barbier and Markandya call our 'asset portfolio', in order to realise or enhance that value through human intervention. It is that way of thinking which is so beautifully and concisely captured by the logo of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, at which I have already glanced in the Introduction: 'giving Nature a home'. Now of course, protecting moorland habitats to support the breeding of threatened species is important work, and handing such habitats on undiminished is a vital responsibility. But humans, however well-intentioned, don't give nature a home, it gives them one – more accurately, it constitutes them and their earthly home at a single stroke. Our inherent tendency to forget this is actually why bird species, along with a whole lot of other natural functions and systems, are now so widely threatened in the first place. And in terms of practical outcomes, mistaking something on which our existence depends for something which depends on us is not just a conceptual muddle. (We are internally related to the former, but only externally to the latter.) It is a mistake like rock-climbing with a rope both ends of which are attached to yourself, and thinking that you have taken safety precautions – a dangerous and potentially lethal undertaking.

Treating Future People Fairly?

So our environmental responsibility cannot take the form of an obligation of justice towards future people, without establishing some sort of capital model for the essential life-affordances of our natural situation. But such a model, when one comes to think about it, would be equally entailed by an obligation of harm-avoidance, were it possible to rescue that from objections based on the contingency of future lives. For if we could indeed make sense of harming future people environmentally, the only sense we could possibly make of it would be in terms of depriving them of the environmental resources needed for their proper flourishing. We cannot harm them, any more than we could act unjustly towards them, in any non-resource-involving way – we cannot insult them, or drop bombs on them, and, if we can starve or poison them, we can only do so by leaving them environmental media which will not serve them as resources for their lives. Nor could we avoid harming them in this way by leaving them precisely the same natural environments as we have enjoyed, since necessarily we change the disposition and patterns of such environments in our inevitable present usage of them. We could only avoid harm to them, in fact, by leaving them a stock of resources from which undiminished levels of benefit would flow – again, we see the natural capital model falling thematically out of this conception.

That model, however, we have just seen utterly to miscast humanity's relation with the whole life-context out of which it emerges. And if the morality of harm-avoidance and that of justice towards future people both entail a model which does that, then these moralities themselves must utterly misrepresent that relation. Correspondingly, if we are still intent on framing our environmental responsibility in moral terms, it seems that we must look beyond both harm-avoidance and justice as these operate between present and future humans, since, even if the other, more direct objections to this framing which I have been canvassing could be circumvented, either approach will yield us only standards for doing right by other people in the matter of an environment taken as a stock of capital assets. Avoiding that radically distorting picture while continuing to pursue an understanding of our environmental obligations based in morality would seem to point towards seeking instead an ethical account of our necessary relations directly with key components of that wider natural context. We find ourselves needing to move, that is, from an anthropocentric to a biocentric configuration of the relevant ethical requirement. We shall consider some classic attempts at this most ambitious form of environmental-ethical extensionism in the next chapter.

❧ Chapter 5 ❧

Non-Anthropocentric Morality?

At various points in the foregoing there has emerged the issue of *anthropocentrism*, which is a pivotal one for environmental philosophy and consequently for this book. It stands thus pivotally because the concept itself is Janus-faced. In one aspect, it expresses an historically distorted understanding of the human place in nature, something that a modern grasp of evolutionary biology, in particular, should have taken us decisively beyond. In its other aspect, however, it expresses recognition of a deep truth: that the world is for us necessarily one to which humans are central, at least insofar as the framers and arbiters of the concepts and values in terms of which we must experience it are always and only human beings. Things matter very diversely in this world, and wherever there is life – rivers matter for otters, and maybe *to* them, rain and sunlight matter for trees, and so forth – but the only tribunal of comparative value (and all value is ultimately comparative) is constituted by human consciousness and judgement.

Moreover, both these aspects of the concept themselves involve significant complexities. Our unique capacity to grasp the way in which humans are just a part of the natural order itself seems to set human subjectivity apart from that order, and our unique capacity to attribute and arbitrate value can much too easily be misinterpreted as establishing that the only thing of ultimate or fundamental value is us.

Anthropocentrism is thus an idea that carries straightforwardly neither a negative nor a positive sign. In environmental thinking, however, it has always been strongly marked with the former. As Andrew Brennan and Norva Lo (2024) have pointed out, environmental ethics right from its emergence in the 1970s has expressly conceived of itself as posing a challenge to traditional anthropocentrism. What in the Introduction I called the fundamental environmental recognition, that the natural world is not there for humans to do whatever they can with – that it deeply *does not belong* to us – is evidently a counter-anthropocentric insight in this sense: it rejects not just the ancient picture of the world as created for Man, but also its Baconian or scientific-revolutionary variant in which Nature merely awaits domination and exploitation through properly-organised human knowledge in pursuit of human purposes. So forcefully, indeed, have some environmentalists

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wanted to oppose such anthropocentric thinking that some of their more radical positions have courted the accusation of active misanthropy (see for instance Bookchin 1999).

We need therefore to analyse this crucially important notion in some detail in order to understand what is implied by setting up, in intended contrast to it, the idea of a *non-anthropocentric* approach.

Varieties of anthropocentrism

In what might be called its metaphysical aspect, we have already encountered the issue raised by anthropocentrism in Chapter 2, when considering Mill's two senses of the idea of Nature. For it is clear that the sense in which this can mean 'the sum of all phenomena, together with the causes which produce them' involves the decentring of human beings, just as it decentres everything else. Nature thus pictured is viewed, in Nagel's happy coinage, 'from nowhere' (Nagel 1986); everything in it is interconnected with everything else, everything changes as the totality changes and *vice versa*, and there are no privileged perspectives, stances or entities. Any remnants of the old idea of Man as the point of the world, the focus of God's purpose in creation, are entirely dissipated in this scientifically-informed understanding of nature as the domain of all ultimately physical regularities, including all those which pertain to human being.

By the same token, the other sense of *Nature* which Mill identifies – all those forces and phenomena unaffected (thus far) by voluntary human agency – evidently places humans at the centre, insofar as it takes the domain of that voluntary agency as its point of reference, over against which the still-unhumanised natural is to be understood. It might seem as though the distinction here need not be drawn from the human standpoint; we can imagine observers from a distant planet carefully demarcating the realms of what happens with, and what without, human agency. But so drawn, it immediately becomes a distinction within Nature understood in Mill's first sense, between phenomena driven by the activities of one particular species and those not so driven – a distinction which the observers, as interplanetary naturalists (and if their instruments were sufficiently fine), could equally draw in relation to the intentional behaviour of monkeys or armadillos or ... But it is only when it is indeed drawn from *our* perspective, at the centre of which it thus places us, that it assumes the kind of significance Mill obviously meant it to carry; only then does it confront us with choices about how to react to the Nature thus

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defined over against us, and in particular about how far to intervene in it and try to make it serve our ends.

Thus, as already noted in Chapter 2, albeit in slightly different form, we have the seeming paradox in which our scientifically-informed overcoming of anthropocentrism serves to return us to an anthropocentric position. As Tim Hayward has put it, the achievement of the scientific objectivity which sees humans as just one part of the natural order

carries with it an enhanced view of the power and autonomy of subjectivity; and this is at the heart of a set of attitudes which privilege human faculties, capacities and interests over those of non-human entities. (Hayward 1997: 50)

For it is of course – we have got used to supposing – just those faculties and capacities which enable humans, uniquely, to transcend their own species perspective as no other creature can.

A similar air of paradox attends anthropocentrism in what, leaving aside these metaphysical and epistemological issues, we could call its axiological or value aspect – that which has always presented itself more prominently to environmentalist thinking. The intuition that the natural world does not belong to human beings has characteristically resolved itself for such thinking into critique of an attitude supposedly informing and driving the destructive human exploitation of that world: namely, that of failure to recognise it as having any value except insofar as it serves human interest and purposes. This failure or alleged failure has long been the focus of critique, despite there having been several different formulations of value-anthropocentrism canvassed in the environmental-ethical literature. These have been helpfully summarised by McShane (2007: 180 n.5) as the beliefs that:

1. as above, the natural world has value only instrumentally in the pursuit of human ends;
2. humans are the only loci of fundamental value, or the only ends-in-themselves; and
3. all value arises in and depends on human experience.

Again, we have here senses of the term ranging from that in (1), where it seems to express an hubristic and dismissive human chauvinism, to that in (3), where it appears as the ethologically perfectly defensible recognitions, both that value is a currency in which only a rational language-using species can deal, and that humans are as far as we know the only such species around.

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Suppose, however, that we start from the acceptably-anthropocentric (3) – mattering of some kind arises wherever there is life, but how much different occasions of mattering matter compared with other such occasions will always stand to be determined by human evaluative judgement. That is no more than to say that the translation of *life-import*, by which a tree can be affected (as when the incidence of wildfires matters for it), into *value*, which of its comparative and rationally action-directed nature affects only humans, is inevitably the business of such judgement. But it is then a very easy transition for what matters *to humans* to take evaluative priority in that human business – certainly, for just the kind of reason which the last chapter was unfolding, there can be no independent standard of impartiality, as between the weighting we (that is, humans) give to what has import for humans, and that we give to other kinds of import, to check that tendency. It would thus lead easily towards the position where human interests and concerns always tend to override other kinds of mattering, a position which, while formally distinct from the unacceptably-anthropocentric (1) above would be practically equivalent to it. (The sub-Kantian claims in (2) above would then count as meta-ethical justifications offered for that position.) A form of anthropocentrism that seems only good sense would have turned, seemingly inevitably, into one which we should want to reject.

This process is not of course one of entailment. We could accept (3), and conclude not to (1) but to some milder form (1a), such as: the non-human world has value only insofar as humans *accord* it value. Not all such humanly-accorded value has to instrumentalise the natural – we could perfectly well accord, for example to wilderness or to other species, the ‘intrinsic’ value in terms of which they matter as themselves and not (or not just) for their resource value. This kind of attitude to nature does not feel reductive or hubristic in the way that (1) does. But it remains the bottom line that what follows from such recognition of intrinsic value is always down to humans to decide: the *weighing-up* of the value, say, of preserving a wilderness area untouched as against that of permitting limited developments like dams or access roads, will always be something which only humans do. And even when preservation wins out, perhaps as a deliberate rebuke to the anthropocentricity of (1), this will still be in virtue of a humanly-determined comparative weight. As Bernard Williams puts it (1995: 240), ‘our refusal of the anthropocentric must always be a human refusal’. What he calls in the same place ‘the paradox ... that we have to use our power to preserve a sense of what is not

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in our power', illustrates just how slippery the anthropocentricity of value can become in environmental contexts.

Anthropocentrism and morality

Let us recall at this point what was suggested in the Introduction about the starting impetus for environmental ethics – the reason why environmental concern, once it became a prominent enough cultural manifestation to be considered philosophically at all, fell so readily into the ambit of the practical-ethical. The deep environmental intuition, brought into increasingly sharp relief by rapid human population growth, intensifying encroachments of urban civilisation into wilderness areas and new awareness of polluting technologies such as those identified by Rachel Carson (1965) in *Silent Spring*, was that the Earth does not belong to humanity to transform in its own image as it might wish. This is still the intuitive basis or the disquiet that environmentally-concerned people feel when they learn, for instance, that

up to 83% of the global terrestrial biosphere except Greenland and Antarctica is considered to be under direct human influence ... About 36% of the Earth's bio-productive surface has been classified as 'entirely dominated by man' (Erb et al. 2009: 250),

or when they see ancient forests felled to provide more pasturage on the way to more McDonalds' burgers. It follows from this that humanity ought not to treat the planet as thus at its disposal – it being an elementary ethical point that if something does not belong to you, you ought not to act as if it does. Now in the ordinary way, that will be the case because whatever it is belongs to someone else, whose property rights you ought to respect – a straightforward source of obligation which evidently does not apply here. But nor does the hypothetical *ought* of prudence, which says that if we want reliably to flourish we should treat the whole delicately and intricately connected web of biospheric life as something in need of carefully knowledgeable and precautionary handling, rather than as something there for us to handle as we like. And it must be more than that, not only because the collective action dilemma tends to undercut collective attempts at environmental prudence, but for what we can now recognise as a more fundamental reason. Underpinning the environmental intuition is the sense that taking the Earth as ours to be disposed of as we like is wrong because of its one-eyed hubristic anthropocentrism, its unhesitating assumption that what humans want is the bottom line and the

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only thing that really matters. But in this light, regarding the Earth as needing to be disposed of *carefully* if we are not to damage human prospects represents no real advance. It is at best a wiser form of anthropocentrism – and in practice is always anyway tending to collapse back into cruder versions under pressure of immediate present needs combined with discounting and pure time preference (what we want now being almost always more urgent than what we don't want a bit further down the line).

The turn to a form of moral requirement was then a move to counter this insidiously pervasive tendency by confronting it with an obligation on present humans to hand on continually viable biosystems to their human successors, whose rights to a world in which they could flourish were taken to exert a categorical demand for respect. This approach, however, although it seems to improve on viewing the natural world as having value purely through its present usefulness, does not really turn the counter-anthropocentric trick. As we have seen in the last section of the previous chapter, moral obligation to future people, whether of justice or of harm-avoidance, can only bind present people in respect of environmental goods considered in a light which reduces them to a resource model, as a stock of natural capital assets the value of which is that of the flow of benefits provided as resources to humans present and future. But this way of understanding the Earth and its biosystems itself expresses an anthropocentric perspective, evident in its suppression of the radically constitutive role of natural affordances to which human beings must be internally related and to which they cannot therefore stand centrally as a point of reference.

It was surely a lurking sense of this difficulty that inclined environmental-ethical thinkers from the early days of the new discipline to canvass the possibility that moral relations of at least a quasi-categorical kind might hold directly between human beings and non-human elements of the natural world. In value terms, this meant the possibility of seeing such elements, or at any rate some of them, as mattering in something like the way in which persons are held to matter – that is, not merely as actual or potential means to someone else's ends, but fundamentally as (in the Kantian formulation) ends-in-themselves. The natural world, or key parts of it, would then not be at human disposal in roughly the same kind of way as persons are not, finally, at one another's disposal; it would demand from us the same order of respect for a kind of autonomy which underpins, or should underpin, our moral relations with each other. To take this line is essentially to construe anthropocentrism as a moral failing analogous to self-centredness in the

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individual. When we call people self-centred, we typically mean one or both of two different but related things: that they tend to be always themselves the focus or central point of their own concern, or that they tend always to see and value things only from their own angle or point of view. Countering anthropocentrism on that analogy would involve registering that other elements of the natural world matter in something of the same respect-demanding way as we ourselves do, just as countering selfishness involves registering the independent reality of other people as foci of value. The stance thus achieved could then be called *zoocentric*, *biocentric* or *ecocentric*, depending on whether the natural elements recognised were animals (in particular sentient animals) alone, living things in general, or the holistic eco-systemic context including both biota and inorganic components.

All of these counters to anthropocentrism have been proposed by different thinkers and writers in the environmental-ethical tradition. The question is whether trying to adapt the template of morality in this way will do the job intended, or whether it will end up exhibiting the kind of slipperiness which we have noted as going generally with the attempt to deal non-anthropocentrically with value. I have already canvassed, in the Introduction, an answer to this question in respect of Singer's variety of zoocentrism: in what follows, I consider (in reverse order) examples of both biocentric and ecocentric approaches.

The Land Ethic

The earliest, and still perhaps the single most influential, formulation of a broad ecocentric position, was the Land Ethic of Aldo Leopold, an American conservationist and ecologist of the first half of the twentieth century, famous essentially for one book of essays, his *Sand County Almanac* (1949). As Baird Callicott, the philosopher who has been the principal exponent and advocate of Leopold's thought, explains this position (see Callicott 1989, 2001), it sees ethics in an essentially Darwinian way as a system of constraints on the actions of individuals in the interests of (initially) the family group, then of the immediate human community and later of the wider human community – something which developed under evolutionary pressure as group solidarity favoured survival and reproduction in the passing on of the group's genes, and then extended itself through its value in preserving inter-tribal and eventually international peace and stability. Leopold then proposed the extension of that idea of ethical community from the exclusively human domain to what he called the *biotic* or *land community* including 'soils, waters, plants and animals, or collectively: the land' – a community to which he emphasised that humans now

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needed to see themselves as belonging, rather than seeing it as belonging to them. This shift in perspective away from anthropocentrism ‘changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it’. Formulated as an ethic, this offered a single criterion of right action: ‘A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.’ (Leopold 1949: 204)

So here we have the idea of an ethic extended beyond obligations of humans to humans, to include obligations on humans to treat non-human entities in ways which reflect and respect their inherent value rather than regarding them purely instrumentally in the light of their value to humans. And those obligations arise within an explicit vision of humans as fully and integrally a part of nature in Mill’s first sense, that of nature as everything that happens, the sum total of events and the powers and forces by which they all occur. Anthropocentrism is thus comprehensively rejected in both its axiological and its metaphysical aspects, as I have called them.

Now Leopold did not pretend to be a philosopher, and philosophically the Land Ethic must be admitted to be deeply problematic, because its proposed criterion is actually neither necessary nor sufficient for right action. When one says, as he in effect does, that an action is right if it tends to preserve the integrity and so forth of the biotic community, and only if it does so (since it is ‘wrong otherwise’), one is claiming that such a tendency is respectively a sufficient condition of right action (if an action so tends, it is right) and a necessary condition of it (unless it so tends, it is not right). One is seeking, that is, to tie right action logically to the preservation of the biotic community. But neither of these claims can be defended on any acceptable interpretation of the notion of acting rightly.

In the first place, preserving the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community is not a necessary condition of right action, since you can very evidently have such action without doing that. If I assist a frail old lady hesitating to cross a busy road, I act rightly (kindly, chivalrously and so forth), but I do nothing whatever for the biotic community except in the most implausibly extended sense. Someone might conceivably argue that the old lady is after all one more member of this community, so that helping her to avoid being squashed by a lorry is to that extent ‘preserving its integrity’. But on that basis, extending the lives of any of the seven going on ten billion human inhabitants of the planet must equally be doing so, whereas on any understanding of ‘biospheric integrity’ which Leopold would have recognised, it is there being that many of us that actually most

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threatens to jeopardise it. Nor will it do to say that the relevant stability or beauty are enhanced by *any* proper treatment of other human beings, since that would in effect be making right action preservative of that community merely by stipulative definition – it would be saying that we will take any morally required action to be doing that, so that I could also subserve the biotic community by, say, resisting the temptation to steal your bicycle. And even if we could stretch the idea thus far without absurdity, there would remain the problem of actions (such as flying to Australia to visit a cherished relative on her deathbed) which seem both right and actively prejudicial to biospheric integrity

Equally, on the other hand, if I craft in my laboratory a virus capable of taking out half the human populations of North America, China and India, releasing it for this purpose would evidently *not* have been acting rightly, but would have done untold wonders for the integrity and stability of the overall, wider-than-human biotic community in each place, and indeed worldwide. So nor is tending to preserve that community a sufficient condition for right action – acting in ways which would conduce to that end cannot be regarded as *thereby* morally justified.

If these considerations do not by themselves dispose of the Land Ethic, which might still be held to register important new insights into how we should behave, they do defeat any pretension on the part of its supporters to offer it as capturing what used to be called ‘the Whole Duty of Man’. But, that being so, there is then the question of how its prescriptions relate to other such duties, a question in which the issues of ecocentrism as against anthropocentrism remain inevitably involved. This is particularly clear if we reflect further on its proposed sufficiency condition. Were Leopold correct, wiping out half the human population of North America *would* be a right action – which is why the land ethic has been decried, in some quarters, as inherently ecofascist (see Regan 1983; Ferré 1996). And certainly it exalts the good of the community (biotic in this case) above that of its individual (in this case, human) members, in a way somewhat reminiscent, though only vaguely and misleadingly, of how Nazism for instance exalted the interests of the *Volk* above those of individual citizens – so that it might seem to lead in the direction of similarly horrific attitudes and behaviours towards those (again, humans) identified as enemies of the biotic community. Leopold himself did not address this issue, but Callicott defends him on the basis that he never intended the Land Ethic to be the *only* ethical standard that we apply, and considerations of right and wrong action vis-à-vis humans are supposed to cut in and prevent that conclusion:

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the duties attendant upon citizenship in the biotic community (to preserve its integrity, stability and beauty) do not cancel or replace the duties attendant on membership in the human global village (to respect human rights). (Callicott 2001: 211)

He thereupon conjures up a couple of what he calls 'second-order priority principles' to help juggle these different kinds of duty in particular cases.

It is with this move, however, that the real difficulty here is exposed. For these principles are, as he frames them, firstly that 'obligations generated by membership in more venerable and instinctive communities take precedence over those generated in more recently emerged and impersonal communities', and secondly that 'stronger interests ... generate duties that take precedence over duties generated by weaker interests' (Callicott 2001: 212). The application of such principles is presumably supposed to establish that our obligations to respect human rights, where this involves matters of life and death anyway, trump our obligations to the wider and less personal biotic community, although they would perhaps not do so where more trivial and questionable rights, like that to all the holiday flights we can afford, were at stake. And no doubt, with the exercise of appropriate casuistical skill, this kind of reasoning can preserve the Land Ethic from ever issuing any too-scarily misanthropic imperatives. But equally clearly, the effect of acknowledging any such principles will be in practice to accord an enduring priority to the interests of human subsections of the biotic community, both as bearing more intimately on, and as tending to affect more strongly, those – that is, humans – who must do the evaluating. And this turns out to be just an awkward attempt to let Leopold have his cake and eat it, because if *that* is the way in which the scope of the Land Ethic is supposed to be restricted, then it is clearly not compatible with seeing humans just as 'plain members and citizens' of the biotic or land community, deserving no less but also no more respect in our choices and actions than any other such members. It is rather to establish them as of special and unique importance in relation to that community.

It will also be recognised that this difficulty has the same structure as that which we found with the idea of acting justly towards future people; it turns on there being no locus for genuine impartiality in the frame. The point of having *principles* for determining which obligations within the overall biotic community should take precedence is to prevent our according such precedence to inter-human obligations just because we ourselves are human. That would be like English people always giving promotions, or the best seats or the most generous rations or

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whatever, to other English people merely because they were English, rather than on the basis of merit or need – it would be what the Routleys long ago labelled ‘human chauvinism’ (Routley and Routley 1979). Deciding things on principle – say, the principle of promotion on merit – is supposed to inhibit such tendencies to inappropriate favouring. Evidently, however, the inhibiting force is severely compromised if we are able to get away with defining *merit* in such a way that only those whom we want to favour can claim it. (Compare literacy tests for the franchise in the post-bellum US South, officially to promote intelligent voting but actually to exclude the newly-liberated and barely educated blacks.) And similarly in the present case, if we can get away with interpreting key criteria like ‘more intimate’ in a way which ensures that inter-human obligations always tend to win out in any contest for precedence, our principle is no longer constraining what it is supposed to constrain, but has become simply a more roundabout mechanism for favouring ourselves. But the crucial *disanalogy* with cases of genuine chauvinism is that in the latter, it makes sense to ask: ‘How, though, would we define *merit* if we were not involved, as English people inclined to favour our own, but were looking at the matter impartially?’ – and clearly, it is inherent in the point of having a principle that we should try to interpret its terms from such a perspective, and as part of this that there should be people who do or could occupy such a perspective with whom we can check how far we have succeeded. This reflects the point, given its most familiar recent form by Wittgenstein (1963), that the proper interpretation of rules cannot rest only on further rules of proper interpretation, but must ultimately be embedded in viable interpretive *practice*. In a judgement as between obligations to humans and to non-human entities, however, there can be no uninvolved standpoint, since to have any adjudicatory standpoint at all is to be human – just as any arbitrating of an issue of justice as between present and future humans can only be done by the former. This is not, as already noted in Chapter 4, to say that we cannot try for impartiality in such cases, but it is to rule out the possibility of any finally impartial judgement as to how far we might have succeeded: and that is just to say that we cannot robustly claim impartiality, which in turn is to recognise that our ‘principles’ are not doing any bottom-line work in restraining our ‘chauvinistic’ tendencies. As regards their proper fulfilment of duties or obligations to any category of ‘others’, present humans are always necessarily marking their own homework.

What we see here, therefore, is the attempt to implement an ecocentric attitude in ethical mode leading quickly to the smuggling back in of the anthro-

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pocentric perspective we were trying to escape. And this, we might by now have begun to suspect, is because to talk about 'right action' at all is to invoke a kind of consideration whose logical home is the arena of relations between human beings as rational agents, impelled to act on reasons adjusted to their seeming impartially reasonable to all such agents. Anything proposed as an ethic on a supposedly alternative basis will therefore tend back into that arena under the force of what we might call logical gravity. The life-blood of the genuinely ethical is such impartiality, and the upshot of our consideration of the Land Ethic is actually to suggest that genuine impartiality can only be achieved in relations among human beings.

'Respect for Nature'

I can deal rather more summarily with the two attempts at formulating a biocentric ethic which I shall consider, since both are vulnerable to essentially the same objection as has just been outlined.

Perhaps the most meticulously-theorised ethic of this kind is still that offered by the late American philosopher Paul Taylor in his 1986 book *Respect for Nature* (Taylor 1986). He there identifies four principal elements of what he calls 'the biocentric outlook' in which such respect is said to consist. In the first place, and echoing Leopold, humans are held to be members of the Earth's community of life on the same terms as all other members. Secondly, and relatedly, the Earth's natural systems are taken to be so interconnected that the healthy functioning of each living thing is dependent on that of all. What makes Taylor's approach to this democracy of interdependence a biocentric rather than an ecocentric one, however, is, thirdly, its focus on individual organisms within the totality, each of which is recognised to be a 'teleological centre of life'. Every living thing, that is, whether animal or plant, is seen as having a good of its own inherent in being that particular kind of organism, a good which it is its organic life-impulse, and hence in the broadest sense its interest, to pursue. Their having that status as possessors of interests is what constitutes for Taylor the relevant 'moral considerability' of living things; and since that considerability arises from simply *being alive*, a condition which may be said to characterise each living thing equally with every other living thing, he draws the radical conclusion that all living things have an equal moral claim to consideration. Hence the fourth, explicitly non-anthropocentric, element of this whole outlook is that when it comes to such consideration, humans have no inherently superior claim as against other species. It follows that our relevant duties, such as to refrain from any act that would harm an organism with a good of

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its own, and to refrain from interfering with the freedom of individual organisms to realise their own goods, are not to be qualified by any such clauses as 'except where this serves human interests'.

All this is admirably logical given its premises, but it does seem at least *prima facie* to leave us with moral duties such as not to weed the garden, which would evidently constitute a *reductio ad absurdum* of the whole position. To avoid this, Taylor resorts, as we saw Callicott doing, to principles for prioritising our obligations, although his apparatus is more elaborate. First he distinguishes among basic and non-basic interests, contrasting basic interests of humans, those which are essential to our existence as persons (subsistence, security, liberty, autonomy), with the various non-basic interests we have in our particular ends and satisfactions, and both these categories in turn with the basic interests of non-humans – those which an organism has in what is essential to its organic existence (nourishment, an appropriate habitat and scope to grow and develop). This enables him to enumerate priority principles in these terms, including those of what he calls *proportionality* (the trivial non-basic interests of humans cannot override the basic interests of nonhumans), *minimum wrong* (the non-trivial non-basic interests of humans can override the basic interests of non-humans only if the minimum possible wrong is done to those non-humans), and *distributive justice* (where the basic interests of humans and nonhumans come into conflict, the solution which allocates resources most fairly should be pursued).

Here again, however, one must make the same comment as on Callicott's cruder procedure. Such principles can lend an air of impartiality to our letting ourselves off the hook of equal moral consideration for all life (perhaps they will license weeding the vegetable patch, if not the garden), but no criterion of impartiality can really apply to our interpretation of what precisely they do entail. Nor, of course, is it just a question of to weed or not to weed. We are constantly having to decide whether such environmentally-significant activities as replacing a native forest with a timber plantation, or landscaping a natural woodland to make a public park, or damming a river for a hydro-electric power project (to employ some of Taylor's own examples) represent the prioritisation of humans' non-trivial or trivial non-basic interests over the basic interests of other species (are they *really* sufficiently different from picking rare wildflowers for one's private collection of pressed specimens, for instance?) – and such judgements are no more subject to impartiality-testing than are our judgements of fairness in resource-distribution where basic interests clash. Again, the would-be biocentric ethical framework

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collapses back upon human judgement as to its application, and its supposed inhibition of any anthropocentrism to which that judgement might be liable is revealed as essentially illusory.

Again, this is not to say that some people will not conscientiously try, out of a genuine recognition of the goods being pursued by other living organisms, to reach prioritising judgements of this kind which do evince what feels like respect for those organisms, and their results may even start to establish a kind of case law. But even then, human beings' ongoing judgement in their own cause, case by case, remains and must remain the bottom line.

Deep Ecology

Another and more politically-directed attempt to philosophise a biocentric perspective has been Deep Ecology, as propounded originally by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess. This has taken the form of a kind of activist manifesto or platform with a philosophical support-structure, the implications of which latter Naess has developed in his own particular way. Here is the platform as he and associates set it out in the 1970s and 1980s – a formulation of principles which, as Patrick Curry has much more recently noted (2011: 101), remains one of the most influential approaches within contemporary ecological discourse:

1. The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
4. Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
5. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease.
6. Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.

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7. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living ...
8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to participate in the attempt to implement the necessary changes.
(Naess 1989: 29)

These declarations clearly express a broad shift in practical perspective from anthropocentric concern with a threatened human future to biocentric concern over reduction of biodiversity in itself. Naess's ecological-philosophical rationale for them, for which he invented the portmanteau word *ecosophy*, has basically two components, again addressing respectively the metaphysical and the axiological aspects of this distinction.

In the first place he confronts the standard picture, which sets humans and their activities over against the rest of the natural world (as their environment) with the relational-field idea of an *extended self*. This sees humans as always thoroughly internally related to and wholly dependent on the rest of the natural world and correspondingly as having a self (which he calls a Self) extending to include all to which they are so related, and thus as having *Self-interest* which correspondingly so extends. For somebody thinking properly in this way, deforestation of the Amazon, say, is felt as a direct attack upon oneself (or rather, oneSelf). This idea evidently captures the spirit of the 'platform', in particular perhaps points 3 and 4, which envisage humans as just one part of a richly diverse natural world and as such having no right to dominate. An attitude consonant with this would indeed be one in which humans as conscious agents identified themselves to at least some considerable extent with the natural world of which they are a dependent part, since, to dominate something, you have to have externalised it, which of course is the reverse of identifying with it. Freya Mathews, a follower of Naess, sets out the thought in this way:

The self is not a fixed entity at all, but a cultivated one – it encompasses everything with which a person identifies. Naess understands maturity generally as consisting in a widening of our circles of identification, and self-realisation is nothing but the final stage of maturity, where we achieve the widest possible circle of identification. That is, we identify not merely with our family, our community, our culture or with humanity as a whole, but also with our immediate environment...our land, our earth ... When we are identified with nature at large in this way, our innate self-love expands in proportion to our new sense

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of self, and our self-interest becomes convergent with the interests of the rest of life. Defence of nature becomes a matter of self-defence. (Matthews 2001: 221)

Made thus explicit, however, this idea seems to claim too much. It is not merely that the subjective human self (with a small *s*) is just too recalcitrant to extending its scope along these lines, so that until everybody thinks of the chopping down of trees in even roughly the same way as they think of taking the secateurs to their toes, there is going to remain something forced and wilful about the proposed identification. A more philosophical objection is that, even if that identification were plausible, it would generate practical contradictions. If I identify myself, as Mathews intimates, with my community, my culture *and* my environment, in the form (say) of a local tract of ancient woodland, I shall find myself conflicted to the point of schizophrenia when the construction company which is the major employer of people in my community seeks to acquire and fell the trees in pursuit of my culture's preference for more theme parks or commuter-belt housing. More philosophically still, perhaps, there is the point, well made by Curry, that wildness is really important to us because of its otherness, because of its being precisely *not* 'oneself':

Was it delightful watching two foxes play, as I did recently, because they were somehow my Self? No. It was delightful because they had nothing to do with me, in any meaningful sense of the word. They were quite unconcerned with me, my will or my desires; they were, in fact, much more important to each other. (Curry 2011: 107)

In this light, Naess's 'Self-realisation' can even seem to be a tacit reversion to the anthropocentric swallowing-up of nature by what matters to humans.

But the other, the axiological, element in Naess's philosophical position is much more interesting. This is what he called *biocentric egalitarianism*: the claim that 'all living things have an equal right to live and blossom', or, as he later glossed this:

the right of all the forms [of life] to live is a universal right which cannot be quantified. No single species of living being has more of this particular right to live and unfold than any other species. (Naess 1989: 166)

This is in effect the same claim as that made by Taylor on behalf of his 'teleological centres of life'; Naess, however, sees it not in the context of an equal interest of each living thing in fulfilling its own life-urge, but in that of the assertion about intrinsic value contained in his first platform principle.

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Now the idea of intrinsic or inherent value is, as we have already had occasion to note, a slippery one. If it means that we accord other living things, as we do people, non-instrumental value as well as the instrumental value in the service of human purposes which they often also have, then there seems no obvious reason why such non-instrumental value should not be differential. It might just matter more to us that charismatic megafauna like lions and rhinos should be around, even if we never go and see them or otherwise benefit instrumentally from their existence, than that the sewer-rat, for instance, should continue to proliferate: such differences in what economists call 'existence value' (to distinguish it from 'use' and 'bequest' values) are perfectly plausible. But intrinsic value that is in principle equal across all life forms suggests value which they have 'in themselves', independently of all human valuation whether instrumentally or non-instrumentally configured. Such value, if we can make sense of the idea, would *have* to be equal – for we certainly cannot make sense of a possible world in which, no humans or other valuing agents having arisen, the life-forms that had emerged bore differing values. How could any life-form have more or less value 'in itself', in this sense of that phrase, than any other? The idea is clearly no more than a wheel spinning loose, unconnected to any mechanism. Differential value only arises in the context of comparison, and if we take *valuers* (that is, essentially, humans) out of the picture, no comparisons can be going on; living things 'in themselves' eat or hide from or outrun other such things, but they don't compare themselves with anything. Life-forms considered in themselves just exist, and there is no such thing as having more or less existence. (Of course, there is always the picture involving God: but we are bound to feel that when He made all the creatures and saw, even before getting around to Man, that it was good, He didn't just forget to assign them differential intrinsic values – He saw that it would have been a completely meaningless exercise.)

Any attempt, however, to *implement* in ethical mode the idea of an equal right to life founded in equal intrinsic value just collapses for essentially the same kind of reason as we encountered when thinking about Leopold and Taylor. Naess does not go in for the elaboration of priority principles, but the basic thought is implicit in point 3 of the Deep Ecology platform, which states as we have seen that humans have no right to reduce natural richness and diversity 'except to satisfy vital needs'. And it is of course always going to be humans who determine how far that exception extends. In so doing, we differentiate between the claims which these supposedly 'equal rights' are taken to make on us – we try to support the

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right of the seriously-endangered rhino to live and blossom, while we do our best to inhibit that of the sewer-rat, at any rate in places of human habitation or resort; as regards any variety of coronavirus anywhere, meanwhile, we take no prisoners. These are discriminations that we will inevitably make from a human perspective of concern and judgement. That being so, rights to live and blossom which constrain us to obligations only as far as we are prepared to be constrained by them, are not really *rights* at all, but pseudo-rights, and the would-be biocentric ethical model for respecting them simply loses purchase.

Beyond ethics?

Here again, therefore, as with the Land Ethic and ‘Respect for Nature’, we see an attempt to use ethical ideas outside the arena of actual human-to-human relations, and supposedly as a corrective to giving those relations automatic priority, being drawn back into that arena, and thus back to a tacit anthropocentrism of concern, by the logical gravity of ethical concepts themselves. And this process appears directly analogous to that whereby the attempt to configure present-to-future human relations on an ethical template fails, as we saw in Chapters 3 and 4, to generate anything except pseudo-obligations of harm-avoidance, justice or care, and thus fails to transcend our well-established tendency to the ‘presentism’ which plays so great a role in driving climate destabilisation and ecological damage.

There remained in those intra-human cases, nevertheless, the thought to which the idea of *intergenerationality*, as the depth in time of present human-to-human relations, sought to answer: the thought that there must be *something* in the idea of a concern which bears on the human future and which genuinely binds or constrains present action, even if that idea cannot satisfactorily be captured in ethical terms. By the same token, I believe that we cannot conclude this chapter’s brief survey of attempts to express our non-anthropocentric intuitions in such terms, without feeling that, even while these attempts fail, there must be something right about the ‘biocentric-egalitarian’ thought expressed in their different ways by Taylor and Leopold as well as by Naess – the thought that all life, including human life, somehow stands on a fundamentally equivalent footing.

Admirers of Wildean epigram might be tempted to express both these recognitions in the claim that the natural environment, whether we think of it diachronically or synchronically, is not after all a moral issue, but something much more important. The real question, however, is how we might make sense of that

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greater importance, and of its practical and political implications, once the whole misdirecting environmental-ethical template has been left behind. The remaining two parts of this book seek for an answer to this question.

PART III.
THE HUMAN LIFE WORLD

❧ Chapter 6 ❧

On Not Being a Bat

We ended Part II with the challenge posed by the environmentalist's strong non-anthropocentric intuition that all life stands on a fundamentally equivalent footing – understood now as the question of how we are to make acceptable theoretical sense of this deep and crucial recognition, once it has become clear that attempts to do so by invoking the paradigm of *moral* equivalence must fail.

Those attempts, as we saw, seek to attribute 'moral considerability' to various non-human components of the world, so that at least some other living things, maybe all, and maybe also their wider ecological contexts, have a claim to be treated with essentially the same kind of respect as we accord (or should accord) to our fellow humans. Other *life* at least, is claimed to share with us a status on the moral terrain which is thus far radically equal, that in such organisms, and perhaps in other kinds of entity, there inheres worth that we must recognise in just the same way as we acknowledge the claim of other humans not to be treated merely as instrumental for our purposes. And that move, I argued, failed in all the cases we examined for essentially the same reason: the representation of humans as fundamentally under constraint – the kind of constraint constituted by fundamental moral equivalence – in their dealings with such non-human others always depends tacitly or explicitly on principles of prioritisation, in the interpretation and application of which humans as such can be under no corresponding constraint. How far the supposedly equal moral status of these others actually binds us is then ultimately a matter only for us to determine, which means that any obligations to them erected on that basis will only be pseudo-obligations.

If this is right (and I support it by further, more generalised argument in the next two sections) we might seem to be left only with our observation of how things are in the empirical world to ground any intuition of fundamental equality among living things or their various forms of life. But, as I shall also argue, there is nowhere in that world for such equality reliably to be lodged. It then becomes a question as to whether we can move beyond both moral and empirical grounding for that intuition.

On Not Being a Bat

‘Moral considerability’

The difficulty just identified as thematic for moral extensionism can be seen as affecting already in full force Kenneth Goodpaster’s seminal 1978 paper ‘On Being Morally Considerable’. This paper, still very recently described by Robin Attfield (a doyen of contemporary environmental ethics) as ‘the most insightful essay on what counts, morally speaking’ (Attfield 2024: 54), takes its inspiration partly from Leopold and partly from the original upsurge in environmental concern which characterised the 1960s and 1970s. In it, Goodpaster puts forward the biocentric criterion of *being alive* as determining ‘the scope of moral respect, the sorts of entities that can and should receive moral attention’ (Goodpaster 1978: 309). He is aware from the start that extending this scope to include non-humans is going to raise difficult issues of prioritisation, but his way of dealing with this is to distinguish between his proposed criterion of moral considerability and one of what he calls ‘moral significance’, according to which comparative judgements of moral weight are to be made in cases of conflict. Thus

whether a tree, say, deserves any moral consideration is a question that must be kept separate from the question of whether trees deserve more or less consideration than dogs, or dogs than human persons. (Goodpaster 1978: 311)

On this basis he tries to set aside the issue of priorities, ‘in the interests of clarity’, in order to deal first with that of considerability – although acknowledging that the former issue will have to be dealt with eventually to achieve what he calls ‘an operational ethical account’ (ibid.).

The real question, however, is whether this original distinction can be drawn while retaining any notion of genuinely *moral* considerability. For suppose we tried to say something analogous about entities whose possession of this status we take for granted – that is, persons. ‘A person’s entitlement to moral consideration’, we might then hazard, ‘must be kept separate from the issue of how much such consideration he or she is actually entitled to’. Recognising that people matter morally is one thing, we should be saying, while deciding how much they matter, one as against another or any as against myself, is another. Spelt out in that way, it is evident that such a distinction would be profoundly unacceptable – it would be inimical to the whole point of morality. We are not recognising as due to persons the order of respect which we call *moral* unless we are also recognising, at the same stroke as it were, that each person makes on us the same absolute claim to such respect, the same claim to be treated as (in Kant’s formulation) an end-in-

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himself or -herself. At the core of morality as it governs interpersonal relations is the thought that a person so considered is not only never to be merely used, but correlatively that they are never to be evaluated *merely* comparatively as against others. Someone may matter more or less than other people in many particular contexts – as a thinker, a soldier, a dancer, or in terms of any of a wide variety of contingent characteristics – but essential to genuinely moral recognition is that such differentiation can never reach as far as to impugn his or her fundamental worth as a person. And it is precisely because there is indeed, as Goodpaster's procedure assumes, no such deep resistance to saying that trees deserve less consideration than dogs (or vice-versa, according to your preference) that the kind of considerability in play there cannot really be moral, and cannot establish the sort of fundamental non-empirical equality as between merely living things that morality establishes as between persons.

The question why such equality subsists between persons is the most difficult in metaethics. It comes down, as Kant remains the philosopher to have seen most clearly, to the very nature of practical identity. Nothing contingent about me could explain my being invested in my projects and purposes in the way that I am – from inside, as free to choose them, as thereby owning them, expressed through them and centrally constituted by them – because this mode of investment would survive any change in my contingencies: were I stupid instead of reasonably smart, burly instead of intellectual, tolerant instead of impatient and so on through all my actual characteristics, still I would stand in that subjectively-configured and reflectively conscious relation to my own practical ends. But then, since it follows from the idea of a reason that any reason I could give for my ends' mattering to me in this intimate way would be a reason for anyone similarly placed to find their ends mattering equally to them, and since 'similarly placed' cannot by the above argument invoke any contingent comparison where fundamental practical identity is at issue, but must refer only to equivalent personhood, practical reason inescapably involves me in attending to my ends as if they could have been anyone's, and vice-versa. More particularly, I cannot rationally take anyone else's practical ends as mattering less, in this fundamental way, than do mine, since any reason for their doing so would also be a reason for downgrading mine too; otherwise put, I cannot be a special case for practical purposes at this fundamental level unless everyone is, and therefore no-one can be so. Persons just as such are radically equalised before the tribunal of practical reason.

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And here is the root of the objection which I have been making to all the various forms of ‘moral extensionism’ we have encountered in previous chapters. That objection has always turned on the claim that there can only be moral obligation or duty where what counts as meeting the obligation or discharging the duty is adjudicable impartially as between those involved. This it never can be, in the nature of the case, where purported obligations or duties to future people or to non-humans are being canvassed, since it is always those whom such obligations or duties are supposed to bind – that is, present humans – who will have the final word on what being so bound is to be taken to entail. The requirement of impartiality which here cannot in principle be met goes with the very basic idea that a moral obligation or duty *constrains one’s will* in one’s behaviour towards others. But now it should be clearer why only persons can pursue such impartiality, and thus why morality cannot properly be extended beyond the domain of interpersonal engagement. For only persons are capable of the kind of reflection just illustrated, that which detaches their practical identities from their contingencies, and thus reveals them as standing in that relation of radical equality to their fellow persons. It is only out of this relation that the demand for impartial constraint on the will can arise – because it is only in appreciating the kind of fundamental respect for others as for oneself which it involves that the demand for constraint on one’s will in dealing with them makes sense. No being incapable of seeing its practical identity in this light could experience that kind of inhibition on simply following the drive of its own will or life-impetus in its dealings with others. Only persons reasoning their way towards action, and thereby towards an impetus to action which must of its nature be balanced against that recognised by others if it is plausibly to be acceptable *as* a reason, can be drawn by the demands of impartiality onto the moral terrain. None of this is entirely free from obscurity, and the respect for other persons’ ends as if they were mine in which morality finally resides can probably never shed some air of mystery: it seems to lose sight of the ultimate separation of persons – how *could* his ends matter as though they were mine? But it is really the question how they could matter *less* which these reflections insist on.

Morality and actual engagement

It might be contended that, since future human beings are also going to be persons in this sense, they at least must be accounted as deserving of genuinely moral consideration – contrary to the argument I was making in Chapter 4. They too might seem to fall within the scope of the Golden Rule, the injunction to ‘do unto others

Morality and actual engagement

as you would have them do unto you' classically expressed in the New Testament (Matthew 7:12). Were we to have found ourselves in their position, we should certainly have wanted our predecessors not to have left us a damaged and destabilised biosphere, and so surely we now have the corresponding obligation to avoid doing that to them? – an obligation which, being grounded in the fundamental recognition of others as ends in themselves, must be as much a moral requirement as our obligation not to abuse for our own ends any presently existing person.

This looks superficially persuasive. On further probing, however, the claim fails – and it does so in a way that sheds important light on the failure of moral extensionism quite generally. For it involves recognising that someone can only be a candidate for properly moral considerability if he or she is capable in principle of engaging in the *practice* of impartiality which actually implements that fundamental equality; and this future people are unable to do.

The status of impartiality as not just a theoretical requirement but necessarily a practice is here central. It turns on a feature we have in fact already encountered when discussing justice as fairness in Chapter 4, but the implications of which we need now to bring out more explicitly. Suppose A has made a promise to B which she wants to escape from fulfilling. She will offer, in due respect for B as before, reasons for why in these particular circumstances she is *justified* in breaking her promise. B, however, may find these pleadings unacceptable, and advance reasons of his own for why she should not in fact be excused. Here appeal must lie to what I have called the tribunal of practical reason – taking the form of the opinion of one or more people of goodwill, unaligned with either A or B, as to what would be generally considered reasonable in the given circumstances. Often this will have an institutionalised dimension involving reference to standing codes supplementary to morality, as it were, indicating the kind of conditions in which promises need not be considered binding; but since there are always liable to be issues over whether this particular situation falls within the scope of such exceptions, the tribunal of reason will need to be able actually to speak and pronounce, which must then be in the voice of some person or persons accepted by both A and B as having no axe to grind.

Crucially, though, unless both A and B in this scenario are in a position to appeal to the tribunal in acknowledgement of its impartial authority, such dealings with reasons for acting cannot really fall within the scope of the Golden Rule at all – that is, they cannot be genuine exercises of moral consideration. That Rule has been aptly described as expressing 'a perspective ... of trying to put oneself in

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the place of those affected by one's actions, so as to counter the natural tendency to moral myopia' (Bok 1995: 321). But trying to follow it when there is in principle no speaking up for the exigencies of that place, in front of a real tribunal, by its actual occupants, is a process which only superficially appears to guard against such myopia. For of course, if my only test for how myopic I am is whether or not I can see how things look to me, I do not really have any test. And while in ordinary cases the independent rationality of the tribunal itself can counter myopic tendencies, in extensionist situations there is no such independence. There can be an actual person or persons C, unaligned with either A or B, who can from that standpoint assess relevant reasoning and pronounce impartial arbitration between them, but where A stands for present humans and B for future humans (or, of course, any kind of non-human), no such possibility exists.

The deep point here is that morality is misrepresented when it is considered, as philosophers are professionally inclined to consider it, as a self-standing logical framework, a structure of rule-governed conceptual relations between various kinds of deliberate action and a nexus of positive and negative values providing reasons. For into such a structure it seems that there could in principle be slotted anything which could be either the agent *or the subject* of intentional harming or advantage-taking; and that would mean that the subject position could accommodate not just rational agents but anything capable of flourishing or not – that is, anything living – which is the burden of Goodpaster's argument. But any framework of this kind is at best merely the theoretical skeleton of morality, and it only articulates something really existent when it is supporting actual transactions between collaborative evaluators, and respondents to evaluation, of engagements between consciously equipollent centres of practical significance. Ethical extensionism as I have been critiquing it is essentially a matter of taking this skeleton, clothing it in the borrowed flesh of interactions which are real enough on their own terms, and then galvanising it – a Frankenstein enterprise which only fails to produce monsters because we remain tacitly aware all along that it can yield nothing but simulacra of morality. The real thing is always something which creatures specifically endowed with practical reason organise themselves institutionally to *do together*, in the business of reconciling their differing interests while trying to acknowledge one another's fundamental personhood. Morality so understood is, and can only be, a characteristically human mode of engagement between actual exchangers of reasons.

Two things relevantly follow from this; and the first is just reinforcement of the case I have been building up in the last three chapters, that morality is a terrain

Life-equality in the world?

on which we can only genuinely meet with other presently-existing humans. As a corollary, it follows that, while present humans certainly do have duties to other kinds of entity – to the dead, to posterity and other manifestations of life – these cannot actually be moral duties. They must, as I began to suggest in the context of intergenerationality at the end of Chapter 3, be thought of instead as something like *life-responsibilities*. We postponed at that point the question of how we should conceive of such responsibility as grounded in the relation between humanity and the rest of nature. To this issue we must shortly turn.

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Before doing so, however, it remains to consider whether there could be any empirical grounding for the environmental or ecological intuition that all life stands ultimately on an equivalent footing. I shall suggest that either we must try to establish such empirical equivalence independently of any particular life-perspective, when it makes no sense, or else we must try to establish it from our own human perspective, when it is always defeated by claims to human superiority which from that perspective are perfectly justified.

To see this, consider again the argument made by Paul Taylor that we have already met in Chapter 5, that each living organism is a ‘teleological centre of life’ pursuing along its own individual life-track its species-specific good, and having in the broadest sense an interest in flourishing as that particular form of organic life. Taylor wants to take our acknowledgement, as informed naturalists, of the fact that organisms characteristically behave in this way, as establishing their fundamental equivalence in terms of entitlement to respect. For how can any claim to human *superiority* stand up against this vision? That humans have language, rationality and a range of related capacities which other creatures lack, is no more of a help to them in pursuing their species good than the cheetah’s gift of speed, or the bird’s of flight, are helps in their corresponding life-endeavours, nor indeed than the plant’s ability to photosynthesise is in its. Were humans to assert their superiority on the basis that speech and rationality are more valuable characteristics than the bird’s aerodynamism or the slug’s sliminess, the question would then, as Taylor insists, immediately be: valuable to whom?

Clearly it is from the human viewpoint that they are being judged as desirable and good ... Humans are claiming superiority over non-humans from a strictly human point of view in which the good of humans is taken as the standard of judgement. All we need to do is to look at the capacity of animals and plants

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from the standpoint of *their* good to find a contrary judgement of superiority.
(Taylor 1986: 130)

The corollary of this is that, independently of any such standpoint, assertions of superiority or inferiority as between different species and their life-appropriate characteristics make no sense. What could it possibly mean to say that rationality was *in itself* more or less valuable than the cheetah's speed? But then, as Taylor rather glaringly fails to note, nor by just the same token would assertions of *equality* make sense. For we might just as well ask the parallel question: equal from what perspective? The mere inapplicability of comparison does not entail equality – if no number is more or less colourful than any other number, this does not imply that all the numbers are equally colourful, since what it tells us is that the attribution of colourfulness to numbers is nonsense. At this level it is just as empty to say that the rationality and the speed are equally valuable life-manifestations, as to claim superiority for one or the other.

Where, on the other hand, judgements of empirical equality do seem to make sense – as when we say, perhaps, that humans and slugs are equally devoted to pursuing their respectively species-characteristic modes of flourishing – or, more rhetorically, that a particularly large and slimy slug might be as impressive a slug as Socrates was a human being – that has no tendency, just so far, to establish any judgement of equal value. The non-deducibility of *ought* from *is* interferes here as forcefully as elsewhere. We may recognise as much commitment, focus and energy in the bank robber as in the philanthropist, without being even tempted to suppose that robbery and philanthropy are equally valuable pursuits – and just so, the judgement between human and slug, as to which if either manifests a higher form of life, is not to be short-circuited through biology in Taylor's fashion.

That judgement, of course, if we are to make it at all, does have to be made from the human standpoint – a necessity about which we should feel no embarrassment, once we have acknowledged that it is after all only from that standpoint that the fact of organisms' pursuing their species life-goods could have any implications whatever for action. *As* a fact, it would be a truth about organic life whether humans had arisen or not, but only for humans is it a truth with any bearings on how such life is to be thought of and related to. And from that standpoint, the human form of life, empirically considered, just evidently *is* a higher form than any other which we encounter. Human capacities are not *inherently superior* to those of other species, that judgement as we have seen making no sense, but they do enable the pursuit of a form of life which from our only available perspective of comparison

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is more comprehensive and more flexible than that of any other creature, and also creatively open-ended in ways which no other living form approaches. Our capacities to speak and to reason, to imagine and to innovate, and the crucial power which they enable to conceptualise, model and thereby manipulate our environment for our own consciously-formulated ends, do not express any underlying *claim* or *right* to dominance; rather they constitute the actual dominance that humans have steadily and irreversibly assumed over their surroundings and their fellow-creatures since they emerged from the African savannah, stood upright and looked properly around them. While evincing no species-independent hierarchy of value, since there can be none, our abilities to understand other creatures where they cannot understand us, to emulate and indeed far surpass by technological means the attributes in which some of them naturally exceed us (outflying the bird and leaving the cheetah lagging), and to develop a wide range of ways in which to live well while they are all bound to their respective species life-patterns, all unite to endow humans with a status vis-à-vis other life-forms which it would be merely perverse not to recognise as empirical superiority.

Set against the deep environmental intuition that all life stands on an equal footing, however, this honest recognition would seem to constitute anthropocentrism in its fullest force. Nor is there any denying that it represents a cast of mind, and an accompanying disposition to dominate wherever they have power to do so, which are responsible for very much of the environmental destructiveness that technological humanity has latterly deployed, and thus for the climate and ecological plight in which we now find ourselves. And yet, as regards grounds for resisting it, we now seem to have exhausted our options. To summarise: the equality of all life cannot be captured in moral terms, since morality is a terrain of non-empirical equality only as between persons. It cannot consist in life-forms' equally pursuing their respective species goods, since that fact of life, seen species-independently, lacks the implications of equal significance or mattering which the environmentalist intuition very clearly seeks to express. But from the only empirical standpoint, our own, from which evaluative comparison is really open to us, forms of life are patently *not* equal, and only one or another ploy for ignoring the two preceding points can give them the appearance of being so.

It is time to ask whether this summary does indeed include all our options for conceptualising fundamental life-equality and what it could mean for us.

Life-forms and lifeworlds

That enquiry will involve us in some lateral thinking, a corollary of which is that the relevance of this next section may not be immediately apparent, although I hope it will soon start to become so. It is thematically linked with the foregoing reflections through the idea of different forms of life in relation to their respective lifeworlds, and more particularly through the further, radical idea of the *relativity* of life-worlds to life-forms.

The best-known locus in recent philosophy for consideration of an issue closely connected with that idea is Thomas Nagel's famous paper 'What is it like to be a bat?', first published in 1974 and reprinted in his collection *Mortal Questions* (Nagel, 1979). Nagel himself is interested in his title question because he is developing an argument in the philosophy of consciousness or mind. Bat experience, with its dependence on a form of sense-perception – sonar, or echolocation – which he suggests that we cannot really imagine ourselves having, is nevertheless clearly a form that one kind of consciousness can take – there is something which being alive and active is *like for you* if you are a bat. Then his argument is that, since we cannot know what bat consciousness is really like, but we can in principle know everything about how bats are materially and neurologically constituted – how they function as living organisms – then bat consciousness cannot be explained wholly in terms of, that is, reduced to, their material constitution or functionality. And this is a point about the relation of consciousness to its material basis which he then wants to generalise to the human case.

To get to grips with the core issue here, we need a rough idea of how bats do actually operate. This brief description from Ed Yong's fascinating book *An Immense World* may be helpful – the book is all about animal senses and their corresponding *Umwelten*. (*Umwelt*, as noted in the Introduction, is the German word for 'environment' commandeered by von Uexküll to refer to a creature's perceptual world, the world its sensory capacities project for it.)

The bat's call is scattered and reflected by whatever's around it, and the animal detects and interprets the sound that rebounds ... every echo provides a snapshot. Bats fly so quickly that they must update those snapshots regularly to detect fast-approaching objects or fast-escaping prey ... they do so with vocal muscles that can contract up to 200 times a second ... It hears its own call on the way out. After a delay it hears the echo. The length of that delay tells the bat about its distance to the insect ... the bat's nervous system is so sensitive that it can detect differences in echo delay of just one or two millionths of a second, which translates to a physical distance of less than a millimetre. Through sonar,

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it gauges the distance to a target with far more precision than can any human with our sharp eyes. (Yong, 2023: 248–50)

What is of interest in connection with Nagel's argument is *why* bat experience of this kind of activity is so inaccessible to us, from the inside as it were. That, on his account, is because it is so radically differently structured from what our own human experience is like from the inside that imagination cannot jump the gap. To demonstrate this, consider an intelligent attempt at doing so, again from Yong's book (the italics, however, are mine):

It is dark, and you, a big brown bat, are hungry. Easily sensing trees and other large obstacles, you zip around them, searching for insects by lobbing strong, infrequent and narrow-pitched calls into the intervening air. Most of those calls *disappear into the distance*, but some return, revealing the presence of something flying at one o'clock. A moth? You turn your head and then your body to keep the target *within the cone of your sonar*. You know precisely how far away the target is by now, but your perception of it is still blurry. As your calls shorten, speed up and broaden in pitch, your sense of the target sharpens ... As you bear down on the insect, the incredible muscles in your throat unleash the fastest possible barrage of sonar pulses, snapping the moth into sharp focus. Head, body and wings all become richly detailed even as you scoop the lot into your mouth with your tail. (Yong, 2023: 254–5)

That is certainly vivid and dramatic. But consider how the italicised phrases are helping themselves to a *human* understanding of what is happening, and specifically of the space in which it is happening. If you think about how echolocation works, a bat cannot have a sense of the 'distance' into which some of its signals 'disappear' – that is, it cannot have what is a crucial component of our concept of space, the awareness that it can contain things to which our senses cannot reach as far. For the bat, absence of reverberation means not *distance* but simply, as it were, *nothing-there-ness*. Its spatial world will be entirely made up of reverberations which its sonar registers as coming from either close to it or further away. Correspondingly, it can have the experience of getting nearer to things as it moves, but that experience is in effect of things materialising as it moves towards them, not of their being out there waiting for it – no awareness of there being things beyond its sensory horizon is implicated. Nor for the same reason can it experience its sonar as projecting a 'cone', because it lacks the sense of *edges* to its experiential frame (implying the possibility of things unsensed beyond them) which would be required for projecting that three-dimensional figure.

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To imagine what it is really like to be a bat, in other words, you would have to imagine being in a kind of space which has depth insofar as things actually encountered in it are nearer or further away, but which does not extend to contain three-dimensional shapes beyond your sensory reach. But such a space must strike us as self-contradictory – and that is why it is impossible to imagine. It is not just thinking of yourself as hanging upside down all day in an attic that will not suffice for grasping what it is like to be a bat: as Nagel points out, that is just imagining, or trying to imagine, what it might be like for *you* to be a bat, not what it is like for the bat itself. But we can come on reflection to see that what Yong is offering is just a more sophisticated way of imagining being a bat-ish human, rather than actually a bat.

The thought-experiment of trying and failing to grasp what it is like from within to be a bat should, however, help us to foreground for ourselves something to which we do not normally attend, because we just take it constantly for granted – that is, what it is contrastingly like from within to be a human being. Recognising how the bat's lifeworld or *Umwelt*, the world for its conscious experience, is dependent on its life-form – on its being naturally equipped with the sensory and cognitive armature enabling it to zoom around catching flying insects identified and tracked by echolocation – can prompt us to the thought that our grasp of space as extending three-dimensionally beyond our reach may similarly depend on *our* life-form. For after all, how (on Earth) could it not? Since Darwin, we know that humans are just one more life-form, one more kind of living creature set up to experience and act in its species-characteristic way: and if negotiating the experienced world of species X is what it is like for individual organisms to participate in the life-form of species X, as encountering a world configured by echolocation is what it is like to be a bat, then surely lifeworld ought to depend in that way on life-form when we put *Homo sapiens* for X, just as much as when we put *Microchiroptera*.

What *is* it like to be a human? One very important part of the answer is that, just as the bat lives and moves in a world organised in terms of its own reverberant calls, we live and move in a world of three-dimensional material objects which are out there in three-dimensional physical space, over against a perceiving and acting subject which is *in here*, and sharply distinguished from that outer world – distinguished with all the sharpness and clarity of logic. (As we noted in Chapter 2, you as perceiving subject must be radically distinct from what you perceive, because anything merged or identical with it would still have to be an *object for you*

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in order to be perceived by you.) The human lifeworld presents itself to us like this essentially because the human form of intelligence is reflective: our primate brains have developed enough complexity for us to be aware not just of whatever we are empirically aware of, as other conscious creatures are in their various ways, nor just tacitly of our own changing relation to the objects of our awareness, as the bat or any other predator tracking or stalking its prey must be, but also of ourselves as the subjective focus and condition of that relation of awareness itself. The German idealist philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte used a simple but powerful thought-experiment to introduce his students to this idea: he would get them to concentrate their thought on the wall of the lecture-room and then he would say: 'Now, think of what is thinking of the wall' (Fichte 1796/1992: 110–11). The reflexivity called forth here, scaffolded as it seems essentially to be by language, is available to no other terrestrial creature. It is just because our awareness has this reflexive character that space is intuitively three-dimensional for our perception. To be aware of oneself as subjectively aware of objects is to relate oneself to them perspectively, and the idea of a perspective contains that of other possible perspectives, which contains that of objects existing in the round, for perception from different angles. The bat, by contrast, operates, and obviously very efficiently, *around* objects in space, but it is not aware of itself as the centre or origin of a perspective *on* such objects, and that is why space for it is not genuinely three-dimensional. Objects in its lifeworld existing for it as echoic patterns, its space lacks the possibility of objects which are not in echoic relation to it. But we inescapably think of the world as extending beyond what we can see – you have the idea of the other side of the wall – because we have the idea of ourselves as subjects of a perspective on objects. The bat has nothing like that because it needs nothing like that to operate in the way it negotiates its world – all it needs is for different objects to emerge or crystallise for it as it moves. It orientates itself in relation to encountered reverberations which its life-form neither requires nor enables it to *construct* as three-dimensional objects. The bat's *Umwelt*, for all its amazing echolocative prowess, represents a world, which, when we try to imagine its movements and its activities, we cannot, as we have seen, help turning back into the spatial world through which we ourselves move.

By this point, however, a serious worry should be growing in our minds. It relates to our unhesitating inclination to explain the bat's sensory and cognitive endowment as its evolved equipment for finding its way around a space which is *really* occupied by three-dimensional objects, differently though it configures them to itself in order successfully to negotiate them. The worry concerns the

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status we are to accord that ‘really’, in the light of what we have also just been recognising as the relation of that way of constituting objects to *our*, specifically human, life-form. For we also very naturally take ourselves to encounter the world as comprising three-dimensional physical objects because broadly (and subject to the further theoretical elaborations of atomic physics) that is *how it is*. But what if our conviction of that’s being how it is reflects not a human capacity (which would make us unique among species) for insight into the species-transcendent structure of reality, but a reflexivity of consciousness life-formed in essentially the same way as the bat’s echolocative capacities are life-formed? What if we, like the bat, represent the world as we do not because that is how it is, but because that is how *we are*? Have we not then to accept our three-dimensional lifeworld as relative to human needs and modes of engagement just as much as the bat’s representation of its operating space is relative to its own?

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Here, if we did accept that, would be interspecies or life-equality with a vengeance – making no suspect ethical claims, and prior to the empirical world because it applies to the very constituting of what we take that world to be. Humans are the equals of other creatures, it would suggest, not *within* our encountered lifeworld, which expresses the human form of life and sets humans up inevitably as central to it, but in respect of its being one lifeworld expressive of one life-form among others. Humans are the equals of bats, and of all other conscious creatures, insofar as the life form of each in its own way generates for experience a life-form-dependent lifeworld or *Umwelt*.

Now evidently, this articulation of metaphysical equality among those conscious life-forms which have *Umwelten* – experienced life-worlds – does not go immediately as far as Naess’s biocentric or biospheric egalitarianism, which claims (implausibly, as we have seen, in its ethical mode) that *all* forms of life have ‘an equal right to live and blossom’. We know that not all life-forms include consciousness, though we may not be sure where it stops. (Plants probably lack it, mice certainly have it, but what about earthworms, for instance?) But the fundamental idea, that we only recognise humans as having no privileged position vis-à-vis other forms of life once we stop trying to capture that essential equality *within* the lifeworld and patterns of relationship (including ethical relationship) which are actually expressive of the human life-form, surely carries over to all life-

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forms. For consciousness of any kind must after all be just a natural development out of the emergence of life as such.

But could we possibly accept this radical levelling? And what might accepting it involve?

The difficulty of acceptance stems from a particular paradox into which we should now be able to see ourselves led by a form of thinking that we cannot avoid. *Naturalism* as an intellectual commitment is really no longer optional at this stage of human development. Simon Blackburn expresses what this means for our self-understanding with admirable succinctness in his book *Ruling Passions* (where he is offering it as underpinning our grasp of morality as well as of more empirical matters):

The natural world is the world revealed by the senses and described by the natural sciences: physics, chemistry and notably biology, including evolutionary theory ... To be a naturalist is to see human beings as frail complexes of perishable tissue, and so part of the natural order. (Blackburn 1998: 48)

It is to see them, that is, as having emerged through the operation of purely natural laws from earlier forms of life within a long-standing terrestrial environment which preceded them and still encloses them. And it is to see them as sharing that natural history of emergence with all the other evolved forms of life currently co-existing with us on the planet. In thus recognising humanity as one life-form among others, however, we should also now be prepared to recognise that the natural world which our sciences describe and theorise is that revealed not by 'the senses', as Blackburn innocently puts it, but by *our* senses, and our associated cognitive capacities, which life-formed endowment must then be taken as standing in a *constitutive* relation to 'the natural order' we encounter, rather than being simply part of it. But such recognition has the inherently iterative instability of all paradox. For unless we *are* taking ourselves as part of that natural order, on essentially the same terms as other conscious species, the issue of its representing our specific lifeworld does not arise; yet, once it has arisen, we cannot go on considering that order and our place in it on just those terms. If we are appealing to the idea of humans as one natural species among others, in the now standard scientifically-warranted picture, then we are seeing ourselves as having emerged out of the same preceding terrestrial conditions as those others, and thus we must be understanding those conditions as earlier phases of a common real world which humans started out sharing, and must still share, with the rest of the biosphere – even though its other creatures engage with what we must then see as pared-down versions of it according to their

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varying sensory endowments. But that is deeply incompatible with relativising the objective natural world to our own life-formed experience as the human lifeworld, in the way that *really* recognising ourselves as one life-form among others would seem to imply.

The only escape from paradox here would seem to go via conceding to humans the status of being uniquely equipped by nature to access the reality of the natural world as it is in itself – that reality of which other species can navigate only their specifically-limited and comparatively impoverished representations. Other creatures have their *Umwelten*, this would be to insist, while humans have *die Welt* – they are confronted in experience with the species-transcending real world. And this would surely be a profoundly unnaturalistic claim, reminiscent of earlier and now-superseded belief-systems which had humans standing in unique relation to a transcendent God, and gifted thereby with an insight into reality denied to the other creatures.

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What is liable to happen to our thinking when it gets onto the terrain of this difficulty may be illustrated from the work of the contemporary philosopher who has taken the idea of humanity's being one evolved life-form among other perhaps most seriously. Colin McGinn has offered an explanation drawing heavily on this idea for why we find the classic philosophical problem of consciousness so intractable. How can something as subjective, inward and essentially first-personal as conscious awareness even supervene on, never mind be produced by, something as objectively devoid of anything remotely resembling those characteristics as neuronal activity in the 'wetware' of the brain – from which we seem, nevertheless, to know that it must arise? We must reject attempts to answer this question by reducing consciousness materialistically to neural or functional states (since it is never the experienced quality of consciousness, as we all intuitively grasp it, which such moves 'explain'), and must also recognise that claiming consciousness as simply a given ontological primitive leaves yawning explanatory gaps (why should it be affected by *brain* damage, in particular, while not disappearing with an amputated limb?). Equally we must dismiss dualism, which cannot in principle explain mind-body interaction, as mythical, and eliminativism ('There isn't really any consciousness, we just think there is') as mad. We are left, says McGinn, with the possibility that

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the natural principles which mediate between brain processes and conscious states are inaccessible to human reason. We would need a conceptual revolution in order to solve the mind-body problem, but it is not a revolution our intellects can effect. It is a general trait of organisms to have areas of cognitive strength and weakness, and the human cognitive system is weak precisely where the problem of consciousness arises. The requisite theory does not come within the scope of our mental modules. (McGinn 1993: 35)

This picture, which McGinn first developed in relation specifically to the issue of consciousness but has subsequently generalised as a response to a variety of quintessentially philosophical puzzles of which he takes that about consciousness to be paradigmatic, depends on the notion of *cognitive closure*. Just as mice, for example, can't understand mechanics because their kind of intelligence is biologically and ethologically closed to the concepts and operations involved, so it is plausible to suppose that there are areas or aspects of reality to which human minds are closed for essentially the same kinds of reason; and these are just the areas in respect of which classic 'philosophical problems' such as those associated with free will, knowledge and personhood – problems, fundamentally, with understanding the place of human minds in the material world – are found to arise. This supposition clearly chimes with the conviction that humans are biological products of evolution just like all the other organisms, from which it follows that they will have developed mental capacities as well as physical ones along their own species-specific lines. Human consciousness presumably evolved as a highly-differentiated and flexibly-responsive vehicle for relating us to the physical and social environments in which we had to make a living, just as did, within their own dimensions, the modes of awareness available to mice (and bats). But although our enlarged primate brains give us also the capacity to turn conscious attention on itself, so that we can become aware of our own conscious states as well as of their environmental objects, consciousness may well in that reflexive employment lack the resources to understand itself in any depth, and in particular to understand its deep connections with its physical basis in our brains – no recognition of which, of course, has ever been necessary for humans' day-to-day survival. (Indeed, precisely *not* to have had those deep connections obtruded on our attention when trying to determine which bush the sabre-toothed tiger might be lurking behind is likely to have been survival-enhancing in itself.)

Hence it is quite understandable that McGinn should present this account as a sophisticated form of naturalism – *transcendental naturalism*, as he labels it, since it involves a naturalistic claim about the *possibilities* of human experience and

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knowledge, and specifically about those possibilities which our nature rules out. As such, its characteristic move is to locate all the inexplicability which confronts us in the classically philosophical puzzles at the epistemic level, as a function of the cognitive constitution of *Homo sapiens*. We must recognise ourselves as naturally stuck with the accompanying inexplicability, but we can also come to see that it is only of that epistemic order and does not impugn the coherence of reality as such. In general, as he revealingly puts it while introducing the whole conception,

Reality itself is everywhere flatly natural, but because of our cognitive limits we are unable to make good on this general ontological principle. Our epistemic architecture obstructs knowledge of the real nature of the objective world. (McGinn 1993: 2)

It is worth trying to unpack that metaphor of ‘flatly natural’ a little here. It is, I take it, meant to suggest a picture of reality as lying everywhere in the same plane of explanation – a domain extending from the comparatively local natural objects and processes with which we empirically engage, through an ever-widening range of objects and processes to which we can extrapolate theoretically, and beyond these to tracts of which our natural cognitive set-up precludes our conceiving. The whole extent, however – crucially including these inaccessible areas – is pictured as laterally integrated by the principle of sufficient reason which organises our understanding of those reaches of reality that do fall within our cognitive grasp. Nothing across the entire domain stands ‘single or detached’, in Schopenhauer’s phrase, but all is bound together according to the causal laws and in the kinds of regular connection which places it in principle within our rational purview. Schopenhauer explains the principle of sufficient reason as expressing ‘in its generality’ the necessary interconnectedness of anything we can understand; ‘nothing existing separately and independently, nothing single or detached, can become an Object for us’ (Schopenhauer 1813/1889: 30). ‘Rational intelligibility’, as Nagel equivalently puts it, ‘is at the root of the natural order’ (Nagel 2012: 17). All reality is thus in principle amenable to a natural-scientific understanding, even where it comprises elements and relations the capacity to conceptualise which we humans lack, and may be so configured as necessarily to lack. There is always in principle an explanation of essentially the scientific kind to be given, even if humans may never be in a position to give it.

What does it mean, though, to say that ‘there is an explanation’ of things like the emergence of consciousness or free will from biochemistry, though one beyond the capacities of humans to grasp? The model of cognitive closure would

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seem to suggest that, for such an explanation to be available in principle, we must posit intelligences standing to ours as regards these matters in the same relation as ours stands to the mice in regard to mechanics. Mice cannot understand, for instance, how mousetraps work, and included in what they fail to understand are the combined workings of pressure, spring tension and released energy which we are able both to explain and to put to use. We can therefore suppose it analogously possible that there are explanations of how consciousness and free-will 'work' as neuronal and biochemical manifestations which could be given by creatures with minds as far transcending ours as ours do those of the mice: McGinn duly canvasses the thought that 'Martians might find the free will problem trivial' (1993: 90). But it is just here that an ominous creaking and grinding in the analogy should give us pause. For what the mice fail to understand, of course, is not just mechanics, but that there is any mechanics to be understood, or indeed anything here beyond their grasp. (They do not find mousetraps philosophically puzzling.) We, however, are taken to be quite capable of setting the cognitive agenda for these Martians, even though it is one which we are also able to recognise that we cannot ourselves pursue. And this should prompt us to look again at the 'flat naturalist' picture in the context of cognitive closure.

The point is that our taking to-us-inconceivable reaches of reality as nevertheless seamlessly continuous for rational explanation with what we can either encounter empirically or grasp conceptually, is surely itself a prime candidate for being another characteristic of our evolved cognitive architecture. And if that architecture is biased towards understanding the material world objectively, and away from understanding conscious mind's deep connections with it, we should expect that bias to reveal itself not just in blankness when faced with the 'problem of consciousness' and similar puzzles, but in elaborating just such a general picture as I have followed McGinn in outlining, of the scheme into which that blankness fits. Flat naturalism as an assumption, that is, seems on reflection to come directly out of the same ethological stable as our settled inability to make materialistic sense of our conscious states, or of the freedom of our will. The corollary of our having evolved to trust ourselves implicitly to consciousness, free will and intentionality for finding our way through a material world even without any inkling of how these features 'work', is our having evolved to assume that, for all that, they must work in essentially the same way as those things whose workings we *do* understand. But the first of these evolutionary results McGinn wants to see as a matter of cognitive limitation, while he takes the second as affording us a reliable intuition of what

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kind of thing must lie beyond the limit. And this is surely to play false with the idea of cognitive *closure*.

McGinn fails to see that this is what he is doing, I suspect, because he is also playing subtly false with his illustrative analogy. This turns on representing cognitive capacity and superiority as species-relative, with the imagined Martians in the same position vis-à-vis us as we are vis-à-vis the mice and similar earthly fellow-creatures. But that idea only gets the purchase it does by presupposing the one 'flatly natural' world which we all of us differentially grasp, and *that* presupposition depends on projecting *our* cognitive grasp as inherently species-transcendent. The analogy only situates us as cognitively limited by our life-form, because it smuggles in a crucial respect in which we take ourselves as competent (in broad terms) to intuiting the reality of the world for all life forms.

To re-express this in terms of our considerations about lifeworlds: we are being invited to see the way in which the human life-form presents us with an objectively material world as somehow species-transcendent – our *Umwelt* is being here taken to be simply *die Welt* – while the way it establishes us in relation to that world as reflectively conscious subjects remains species-relative, and in virtue of that relativity 'cognitively closed'. This position has the same inherent instability as the paradox of naturalism which we were exploring in the previous section. 'Reality ... is everywhere flatly natural', that is, must be recognised as an *expression* of our cognitive endowment, and so cannot at the same time be used to situate that endowment as in any sense 'closed'. The assumption underpins our life-formed constitution of an objectively configured and rationally intelligible realm of nature, to which our life-form sensorily and cognitively commits us. And what sense could the concept of *enclosure* make here? We can only say that the bat is enclosed in its echolocative capacities, because, while they enable its activities, they prevent it from appreciating the 'true' shape and extent of its operating space (as we take then to be); but no such comparison is of course available to us, whose capacities that shape and extent necessarily express. What kind of qualification, therefore, can we be proposing to our taking the human lifeworld in its objectively physical configuration as the real common world of nature, by pointing out that this is what our own human nature requires us to do? What corrective force could the claim that this expresses a radical metaphysical equality, as between life-forms projecting their respective lifeworlds, actually have?

McGinn argues that the value of philosophy, given the insolubility of its central puzzles by human minds which he posits, must lie 'in the humility encour-

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aged by recognising our limitations' (1993: 53), and this seems very much the right note to strike. But what kind of humility can be involved in conceding limitation with one hand while taking it back with the other? How can we recognise our species-specific limits as expressed in our configuration of a human lifeworld which we also cannot help taking as the everywhere-flatly-real world of nature? These questions bring us to the philosophical heart of the book.

❧ Chapter 7 ❧

Deep Naturalism

Human beings relate to their world through a form of awareness which we might call self-conscious, if that did not tend to suggest the cast of mind wryly noted by the philosopher Mark Rowlands when comparing us, to our disadvantage, with dogs (who appear to lack the relevant cognitive equipment): ‘For an adult human, except in comparatively rare circumstances, to think at all is to think about yourself.’ (Rowlands 2024: 49) But while we certainly enjoy, or suffer from, the self-consciousness which involves wondering whether one is looking one’s best, is *really* a good person, and so forth, the origins of this humanly-characteristic disquiet lie in a much more fundamental consciousness of self which is implicit in the way we are conscious of anything. This is the *reflexivity* of our form of consciousness, its capacity to grasp itself in addressing its objects. It is a matter of our always being at least potentially aware in our life-transactions not just of objects, people, events and our own thoughts and feelings, but also of ourselves as aware of them. (I see the vase, and also ‘see’ that it is focal to my field of vision; I feel a slight numbness in my hand, but also ‘feel’ myself to be only just conscious of it.) We qualify here, no doubt thanks to our more articulated cortical development, for something going considerably further than the pre-reflective consciousness of self that we share with other conscious creatures. The bat must tacitly relate itself to its surroundings, its orientating echolocative shrieks bouncing variously back to *itself* as it moves; and something similar must also go for any predator carefully stalking its prey, or indeed for any being dealing circumspectly with its surroundings as its life-form relativises them. But the content of the bat’s attention does not include itself attending, in the way ours can and always implicitly does. Our perceptual and proprioceptive experience is always not just *as from* a centre of awareness, but *as of being from* such a centre.

That is to say that our experience is always *phenomenal* (from the ancient Greek word for appearance), which at this level means no more than to say that we are always implicitly dealing in practice with the potential difference between objects as they are, and as they are represented by us to ourselves. Primitively, we register how our view of the rock or the tree changes as we move in relation to it. We also collaborate with other human beings on the basis that they from their

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positions are very often seeing and tracking the same things as we are from ours. We work instinctively with the idea of things both ‘from my perspective’ and ‘in the round’ – thus our most primitive engagements are organised by spatiality, since ‘in the round’ involves the idea of perspectives from different viewpoints at the same time (‘He too can see this from over there’). Again, we work in the same instinctive way with the idea of objects as having existed before and continuing to exist after our perceptual encounters with them – that is, with temporality as involved in the distinction between intermittence of experience and persistence of objects (‘This is the same one as I saw before’).

Evidently the role of language is crucial in scaffolding this structure of awareness. Language certainly facilitates its ongoing erection through our interactions with others, but it also presupposes it. Implicit in bringing a particular under a concept (that is, in the basic predication which is fundamental to linguistic communication) is an appeal to experiences of things as distinct from things themselves. It is only because we can as it were skim off characteristics from objects, which in turn is only possible because we can think about our own representations of things as distinct from the things themselves, that we can become concept-users at all. (I can detach the appearance *yellow* from the banana and then later apply it to characterise the daffodil, but I cannot strip its actual yellowness from the banana and paste it onto the flower.) And hence arises the difference between seeing the red berry, which the foraging bird can do, and the seeing, empowered by our human form of understanding through conceptualisation, *that the berry is red*.

We are also aware in reflexive consciousness of the difference between our making things happen (which we grasp as origination of movement from our subjective centre) and their just happening ‘objectively’. Again, primitively, things move in relation to me or I move in relation to them, and in either case their appearance is likely to change; very often in the latter case, however, I am aware at the same time of something as a *reason* prompting my movement (to get from A to B, to change some material arrangement, because I am uncomfortable ...). Here reflexive awareness is of the difference between our relation to changes in appearances which flow from our own deliberate agency and to those which do not – and hence of our ability to cause our representations to change independently of changes in what they represent, and also of capacities in the things which we represent to change independently of our doing anything but observe them.

None of these basic reflexive awarenesses is yet philosophical, in the sense of involving or requiring reflection on the structure of our experience; they constitute so

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far only consciousness of self as given *in* that very structure, even when its contents are entirely practical. But a characteristic of specifically human language-shaped intelligence, clearly connected with the reflexivity of our consciousness, is that we not only can but are naturally drawn to formulate these differences for consideration aside from our practical engagements. Philosophical such consideration looms, perhaps inevitably, when we pull these various strands together as recognition that the perceptible world is always *mediated to us* by our representations of it (as, for instance, shaped, coloured, of differentiated duration and causally interactive). And philosophy arises in full force when we recognise, further, that, since there can be nothing which counts as *unmediated* access to that world (we can neither experience anything unexperienced nor think anything unthought), understanding how the world relates to our representations of it cannot be a scientific (that is, an empirical-experimental) business, but must always be a conceptual one.

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Let us therefore pursue that business in relation to the paradox or conundrum we identified in the previous chapter. That was the paradox involved in humans' taking what they can come to see as their species lifeworld or *Umwelt* as the single objectively real natural world, within which they now know themselves to have emerged from common origins as just one life-form along with others. We can tell either of two stories, both of them broadly naturalistic, about what is going on here:

Story 1: The real world consists of physical objects subsisting in time and space, and interacting causally. From certain very long-term interactions within that world arises life, and in due course a creature (the human animal) which has developed sensory and cognitive capacities enabling it to experience, represent and conceive of the world in which it finds itself as that world really is – that is, in broad terms as objectively spatiotemporal and causally organised, with of course a vast range of other features forming its empirical detail. Eventually on that basis the creature theorises its way to scientific knowledge (including of its own evolutionary history), and consequently develops a powerful technological pull on the world around it.

Story 2: A particular creature (the human animal) finds itself equipped with sensory and cognitive capacities on the basis of which it has to encounter its experienced world as one of spatiotemporally subsisting and causally interacting objects (with, as on Story 1, a lot of other features besides), just as it discovers other creatures differently equipped to inhabit lifeworlds which they are set up to experience and negotiate. *Having* so to encounter it, humans must also

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think of and deal with their empirically objective world as real, and on that basis they find they can develop (along with an evolutionary account of themselves) scientific theorising which is quite successfully predictive in a range of areas, and a technological armoury which is powerful, sometimes dangerously so, when dealing with the world as so conceived.

Now (as just noted), we cannot choose between these two stories by comparing the world as it really is with our representations of it, because we cannot step outside our representations to make such a comparison, and so all we have are representations which, on both accounts, we take as representative of reality. But nor, evidently, are the two just interchangeable. It is true that they take in, so to speak, each other's washing: if we go for the first we shall be giving ourselves, through that evolutionary history, a strong basis for telling ourselves the second, while accepting the second explains why we are so strongly inclined to tell ourselves the first. This relationship of mutual implication is a crucial feature to which we shall have to return. But, considered separately, their resonances for how we think about ourselves, and particularly about our science and technology, in relation to the real world of nature, are markedly different. If our theorised understanding gives us a grasp on the world as how in broad terms it independently is, as Story 1 has it, we would seem to be on much firmer ground in seeking to manage and organise that world than we should be if our success depended on the pragmatic fit between our life-activities and how we cannot help seeing the material basis of things, which is the kind of robustness which Story 2 allows it. According to Story 1, the natural world has, independently of us, the measurable objectivity – the primary qualities of size, shape, motion and so on – in which we ground our scientific representation of it, and that seems as if it should licence a lot more confidence in manipulating it than does thinking of those qualities according to Story 2, as grounded in our being unable to represent the world otherwise, even though so representing it seems to have served us in many respects well. (But perhaps in other respects not so much – claims about the 'success of science' generally depend for their persuasiveness on looking only at aspects of the world, such as the physico-chemical or the astronomical, that science can successfully frame, while carefully ignoring others – the psychological and economic come readily to mind – where its application is much more Procrustean.)

There is no doubt, in fact, that the second story seems to be the more 'ecological'. It puts humans on essentially the same epistemological footing as other creatures, dependent like them on species-specific sensory and cognitive capacities

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both for the kind of world with which we engage and the kind of engagement with it which we can have. In particular, it does not picture humans as uniquely privileged in terms of their cognitive access to ‘reality as it is in itself’ – that reality of which, on the first story, our representations capture the spatiotemporal and causal fundamentals, whereas the bat’s, for instance, fail to do so in the ways which we have already considered. Thus, while Story 1 is evidently the story which the Scientific Revolution told itself, Story 2 answers at least more closely to what I have called the fundamental ecological intuition, with which the Baconian impulse of that movement was originally in conflict, and to which its persisting scientific and technological imperatives remain hostile: the intuition that the world has not been made, or does not make itself, uniquely available to humans to manipulate for their own benefit. Furthermore, while Story 1 is of a creature uniquely equipped with insight into how things really are, and empowered by that insight to take up an external relation to the natural world, probing and manipulating it from a position of detachment, Story 2 is of a creature able to take up such a relation *only insofar as it is prepared to take Story 1 as the whole story* – that is, of a creature whose approach to nature on the one hand and understanding of itself as a part of nature on the other, are in intimate *internal* relation.

There are also relevant differences between the ways in which each story offers to justify itself by including its own genesis and history. Story 1 is evidently premised on the development by humans of their uniquely accurate world-representing capacities through natural selection. An intelligent primate with the cortical resources to achieve the kind of reflexivity of consciousness characterised at the beginning of this chapter, and thus the disposition to grasp the natural world’s objective three-dimensionality and causal organisation and the ability to put that grasp to practical use in manipulating its surroundings, would be set up for the kind of evolutionary success which humans have (it is tacitly supposed) in fact achieved. But firstly, to avoid being just obviously question-begging, this account must assume criteria of evolutionary success other than our having come to theorise and manipulate our world (something which Story 2, of course, also recognises that we can do). And these criteria would have to be along the lines of our having used our privileged cognitive access to reality to outstrip other terrestrial species in the competition for survival. In a world, however, that bristles with weapons of mass destruction in the hands of creatures seemingly incapable of not fighting among themselves, and where these creatures seem, still more threateningly, quite unable to abandon ways of manipulating their environment which are hurrying

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the planet towards becoming uninhabitable for them, it is surely rather soon to talk about humanity's competitive success. (In those stakes, the canny odds would now seem to be on the insects.) If the fact that we can send men to the moon is supposed to show that our representation of the natural world as essentially the world for physics has been *successful*, what does the now increasingly desperate state of the Earth from which we despatch them show?

Moreover, even if we set such doubts aside, the evolutionary self-justification of Story 1 remains question-begging at a fundamental level. For the very idea of adaptation to an existing and independently changing material environment, on which the concept of natural selection is based, simply builds in the picture of humanity's relation to its world which the story itself paints, and so that picture cannot be provided with any warrant by our supposed adaptive success. It would be just as much and just as little warranted by a natural history of comparative adaptive failure, had we for instance responded to our early material environment by remaining at the level of the Neanderthals and never rising to science or technology at all.

Story 2, by contrast, starts from no assumptions about how the world is, independently of the human presence and form of life – it is indeed precisely a story about how we can make no such assumptions. It suggests how we have nothing to say about the world considered apart from its manifesting itself differently in different lifeworlds, including ours, although it also makes clear how we come to think that we have Story 1 to tell about our relation to the particular lifeworld which is, in fact, ours. But its self-justification for this position begs no questions. It does not say 'Lifeworlds are all there are, so that is what our human world must be too', which would be its analogue to Story 1's assumption of an objective material world to which humans adapt. Rather, it says: consider the other conscious creatures, so variously akin to us, and the way in which each must move in the *Umwelt* or lifeworld generated from its specific sensory and cognitive endowments – even though in trying to understand these *Umwelten* we can never get fully inside them, but must always grasp them, as we did the bat's, in relation to the world as *we* take it to be. And then consider how many reasons we have to suppose ourselves to be in just the same position with regard to the world as generated by our own endowments, and how we have no independent reason to award ourselves the privileged access to reality that would establish that we are not.

While both stories are fully naturalistic, in other words, Story 1 explains itself by assuming itself, and Story 2 both explains itself in an essentially non-circular

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way and also explains the genesis of Story 1. It is for this reason, even more than for those to do with its ecological credentials, that I propose to distinguish the spirit of Story 2 from what (recollecting McGinn) we might label the ‘flat naturalism’ of Story 1, by claiming that it expresses a prompting towards what I want to call *deep naturalism*. This term suggests also a contrasting three-dimensionality: flat naturalism is aptly so called because it is visibly two-dimensional: its crucial elements are only the material world of nature as it is in itself, and humans as the part or upshot of that world which can represent and theorise it as it is. The move towards a deeper naturalism adds the further insight, as it were at right-angles to both those elements, that they stand in a profoundly *expressive* or *realising* relation to one another.

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But Story 2’s greater ‘depth’, for all that, also undeniably involves telling us that the world we encounter in experience is radically a *human* world – the human lifeworld. In a powerfully science- and technology-driven culture where we plume ourselves on our theorised understanding of and practical response to a natural world predating humanity’s emergence by aeons and extending to unimaginably vast and distant galaxies, we will not be readily disposed to accept such a claim on the grounds that it is somehow ‘more ecological’ or more respectful of humanity’s essential equivalence with other forms of life. On the contrary, many people will be likely to treat the whole account as a *reductio ad absurdum* of that purported equivalence. If thinking of the world as our lifeworld, on a par with the *Umwelten* of bats and the rest, implies considering black holes bigger than the Solar System and a billion light-years away as part of the *human* world, they will say, it will be far better just to accept that we *are* specially placed and cognitively privileged in relation to a nature that dramatically transcends us, in the way that flat naturalism, Baconian science and (apparently) ordinary common sense all make them out to be.

This reaction to what Nagel, disparaging idealism, once called ‘an attempt to cut the universe down to size’ (1986: 109), has of course its own problems. The idea that humans are ‘just a chemical scum on a moderate-sized planet’ (due to Stephen Hawking, as quoted by Davies 2008: 251) ought whenever one or another version of it is trotted out immediately to prompt the question: moderate-sized within what frame of reference? Galaxies are not vast and the Earth tiny, nor Jupiter (for instance) large and the Earth moderate-sized, *in themselves*, but only comparatively – and the only comparing going on is that being done by humans.

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(In itself, everything is just the size it is.) By the same token, the Earth cannot sensibly be thought of as an *unimportant* corner of the universe except on the basis that there exist contrastingly important sectors: but then, important how, and to whom? What might make the spiral nebula in Andromeda important where, say, the whirlpools formed by the Saltstraumen tidal current off the coast of Norway are not, or are less so? Varying significance here is evidently a matter of what humans happen to be interested in for some particular purpose or other. Left to itself, as it were, the universe simply does not *do* importance, any more than it does size. The statement anciently attributed to Protagoras, that ‘man is the measure of all things’, expresses the deep truth that not only terms such as *important*, but also *vast*, *moderate-sized* or *tiny* are strictly meaningless except within frames of reference devised and applied by human beings – so that, *pace* Nagel, sizing the universe is always inescapably a human activity.

But this response will hardly do on its own. If Story 2 is to seem tellable, it must be motivated philosophically – that is, from a combination of epistemological and metaphysical considerations – rather than just in the rough-and-ready ways we have so far employed. And it is evident from the relation between the two stories how we must set about this. We have seen that Story 1 pictures reflexive consciousness (consciousness of ourselves as conscious) as setting us up for an effective grasp on the independently substantive spatio-temporality and regular behaviour of the objective world. That account makes this relation contingent, one which could have been otherwise. Humans might not have been prompted by their changing circumstances to evolve just that form of consciousness, and might then have remained able to perceive only a reduced version of the world, as seemed to be the case with the bat. On Story 1, close correspondence between how the world is and how we are able to represent it just happens, through a lucky evolutionary break for humanity, to be the case. On Story 2, however, it *has* to be the case, because the world’s spatiotemporal framing and causal organisation are there the reflection or expression of our reflexively conscious form of life, and so the relation is a necessary one. And if our lifeworld expresses or realises our life-form of reflexive consciousness, that *requires* objects with general characteristics answering to that mode of consciousness to compose any reality which could be a world for us. It follows that, if we can show how for us the world *could not be otherwise* than spatiotemporal and causal, we shall thus far have vindicated Story 2.

Now, although he was not concerned with any issue which he could have framed to himself in anything like those terms, the philosopher whose strenuously

sustained attempt on issues of a cognate kind still offers the most effective tools for trying to show this, is Kant. (Anyone surprised by that is likely to be forgetting that he was a luminous genius, and as such for the ages rather than just for the late eighteenth century.) I am not in what follows concerned with channelling Kant, still less with Kantian exegesis, but anyone familiar with the first *Critique* (Kant 1787/1933) will recognise how I am seeking to repurpose some of his central insights for the present context. Kant developed a form of what he called ‘transcendental’ argumentation which is peculiarly apt for our task here. Such an argument starts (like Story 2 itself) only from the undeniable fact of our reflexively conscious experience. It then elucidates the conditions of possibility of such experience – that is, what in general has to be the case for it to be possible in the form in which we undergo it – and concludes that (since our experience, being actual, must be possible) those conditions equally must obtain. If we consider along these lines the perceptual experience of *things changing* (and change, being an inescapable grounding constituent of all our perceptual experience, can here go proxy for that experience in general), and if we think about the terms of such experience for a consciousness which is reflexively aware of itself as conscious, we can show it to be a requirement, as it were a logical demand from within experience itself, that such change be encountered as happening *objectively* – that is, independently of consciousness – and as being reflected in our subjective representations as so happening.

To make this vivid, imagine watching an ice-cube melt: over time it gets smaller and smaller, its sharp edges more and more blunted, the pool of water larger in which it sits. (If this sounds too much like imagining watching paint dry, imagine also helping it along with a hairdryer.) Remind yourself too of the possible differences, in practical experience, between the appearances of things and how those things actually are – say, by imagining yourself looking at the cube from various angles as it melts. If you were actually to be doing all this, our reflexive form of conscious experience would be providing you with awareness both of the ice-cube and also tacitly of your subjective self as aware of it. But, crucially, it would be giving you a cube which was changing and a subjective self which was remaining unchanged as it registered that procession of changes, since change can *only* be perceived by a subjectivity which stays the same – if Jane sees sunshine on Monday and Joe heavy rain on Tuesday, neither has thereby seen a change in the weather. And the point is that you could not remain thus subjectively unchanged in order to experience the changing ice-cube, unless your perceptual presentations of its successive stages were

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indeed of an external object changing independently of your consciousness. For if they were not – if you were just possessed by purely subjective appearances, ‘as of’ an ice-cube (which is the only other possibility) – you would not have enough for change *even in those appearances*. Reflexive consciousness is awareness of oneself as aware of things happening, but if the only thing happening *is* oneself, this as it were disappears up itself; awareness of purely subjective change would have to mean awareness of oneself as both changing (in one’s subjective states) and (for registering those changes) remaining *unchanged*, and this is plainly unintelligible.

The reflexive form of conscious experience, awareness of your awareness, is thus only possible when you take that of which you are conscious as a series of representations of real objects – that is, of things outside or beyond your consciousness which change or stay the same independently of that persisting and registering consciousness. Since we have such a form of experience, that is how we must take its deliveries – here is the logical demand from within experience, the necessary relation between it and its world, informing standard cases like this of the changing ice-cube.

This last qualification is important, because of course there are also cases, like being aware of an anxiety diminishing, where consciousness of change seems not to require that there be anything similarly objective, in the sense of ‘existing externally to my consciousness’, which is changing. But the kind of *inner* objectivisation which goes on in such cases – the conscious ‘stepping back’ from my anxiety, for example, needed to appreciate that it is diminishing – is only possible because, in the overwhelming majority of our conscious activities, we take the changes which we register to be happening independently of our changing awareness of them. (If *per impossibile* everything of which we were aware was anxiety-like – that is, with no firm distinction ever to be drawn between the awareness and what it is awareness of – there would again be no basis for awareness to have come to present itself as the experience of a continuing subject confronted with changes.)

So in the nature of our reflexively conscious experience, it *has to be* of an external world of objects. Adequately to justify Story 2 on this basis, however, we need to be able to derive the full range of general objectivity (substances in spatiotemporal and causal relations) from this idea of change happening independently of consciousness. Here is a sketch of how we might do this.

In the first place what changes, whether or not independently of consciousness, must be in time, for this is the very dimension of change. But change independent of consciousness cannot be temporal just *in virtue* of appearing in consciousness –

the independence requirement means that its differing states over time must inhere in something other than consciousness. Thus we must think of the permanent in which they inhere (the continuing something which changes must be changes *of for in*) as distinct from the continuing consciousness in relation to which we recognise change, and the idea of this 'objective permanent' is that of *substance*. But if we had only the dimension of time in which to place the objects of our experience, this would not be enough for substance – all it would give us would be different 'objective' states at successive temporal points. To think of independently-continuing substance as bearing these changing states, we have to think the possibility of *the same object at different times*, and this means we also have to think the possibility of non-sequential differentiation (that is, of differing objects at the same time), which is just to think *space* (that is, the possibility of objects' being arrayed adjacently rather than sequentially). That this adjacency must extend in three dimensions (rather than, say, just two – which in principle also would serve to distinguish it from time) stems from our reflexive awareness of consciousness as a *perspective* on objects, this being an inherently three-dimensional notion.

One might ask at this point: must not change happen independently of subjective awareness for the bat too? – for it can surely take what its awareness registers as a moving target in static surroundings, not just as differences in patterns of sound to which it attends. And yet we have noted that the bat's engagement with its world does not really generate for it three-dimensional objects. But the crucial difference is that it is not aware, as we are, of what it experiences *as* consciousness-independence. Its experience is sufficiently informed by objectivity for it to catch its prey, as must be that of any conscious creature which negotiates its lifeworld, but it does not also *sense* or *think* that objectivity as such. In any perceptual awareness of mine, by contrast, there is always invested semi-subliminally my awareness of being a consciousness aware of whatever it is, and it is this which as it were fills out the human form of objectivity with experienced spatiotemporality, and with conceptualised substantiveness and causality, which do not arise from the sensory-cognitive provision of the bat.

As to causality, let us return for a moment to the melting ice-cube. There is a perceptible order to your perceptions of this process – they are of the cube getting progressively smaller. But now suppose you perceived it first doing this, then suddenly as large again, then tiny, then increasing back towards its original size. There would be no difference, just for these perceptions, between a persisting object passing through these different states, and a series of different objects succeeding

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each other at the same location. But, if this is so, the notion of *perceiving an object* seems to be dissolving. We might ask in this connection why, indeed, you do not take your actual perception of progressive diminishment as registering different (but progressively smaller) cubes succeeding one another, rather than the same cube melting. The answer is that there would simply not be enough in the latter case for objectual independence of consciousness. To think ‘the same object changing’ rather than ‘different objects appearing successively’ – that is, to retain the basic idea of substantive objectivity – I must think of the changes as inhering in the object. But this inherence I must also think as law-governed – for if objects could change *randomly* independently of consciousness, there could indeed be absolutely no difference for consciousness between change *in* an object and change *of* objects, and hence no sense of any object as substantially persisting through change. The only way to conceive of change as law-governed independently of consciousness, however, is to conceive of it as consisting of objective states standing in *necessary succession*, and this is just the idea of causal dependence-relations between later and earlier states. If state B *objectively has to* follow state A, which can only be what ‘law-governed’ means here, then causality is inescapably in the frame: not B unless A, nor A without B. The causal relation need not of course hold directly between the states in question, as is the case for example with the well-worn example of night following day, but there will be something – here the Earth’s movement on its axis – causing them to occur in that order; there *could not* be the night unless there had already been the day generated through that particular rotation. (And of course this is what is happening with the ice-cube too: its states do not each cause their successor state, but are all caused to follow successively by the ambient temperature.)

So we have shown, if these arguments work, that *all* this – spatiotemporality, substantiality and universal causality as the general characteristics of objectivity – arises out of the fundamental idea of change for perceptual consciousness of which we are conscious that it is happening – that is, out of what sensorily-mediated experience must be for a form of life characterised by reflexive consciousness. And this gives us, in support of Story 2, the general form of our empirical world as constructed necessarily by the human life-form.

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The other direct philosophical motivation for that picture is the sense it makes of the human lifeworld as also a world of really-encountered values. We can best exhibit its doing so by exploring the ancient puzzle of the freedom of the will.

This issue is familiar enough not to require much by way of introduction. Its crux is that, as we have seen, the world of objects existing and interacting independently of consciousness, which our particular reflexive form of conscious experience must posit, must at the same time be posited as governed by universal causality, the in-principle explicable occurrence of every event in a necessary sequence, for us to make sense of its independent objectuality. But humans considered as embodied biological beings are as much a part of that natural world as any other set of objects and, therefore, as such, not exempt from that universal causal regime. So it seems that human actions, being always events sprung by and involved with other events, must be determined in their occurrence, just like all other natural happenings, by the events which relevantly preceded them – including neural and chemical events within the body and brain as well as all those character-shaping events in any individual's personal history. The upshot of this is *determinism*: the claim that, just as any external natural event, given all its causal antecedents, could not have occurred otherwise than it did occur, so we, when we act, could never have acted otherwise than we actually did. The radical difficulty is that we also know, with as much certainty as we know anything – literally, as certainly as I know that I am now sitting on a chair and typing these words – that this claim is false. I go for my morning run despite the wind and rain, but I could have opted out in those conditions – that is why I am to be praised for my dogged tenacity, or censured for my obstinacy, depending on your point of view. We simply cannot suppose that these and similar transactions, so utterly fundamental to the organisation of human life, could constitute what would have to be understood as a pattern of habituated illusion. I know that at the point of choice I really could have decided either way, and that *nothing* – not just no other person nor restraining factor, but nothing in my own personal history, character, physical constitution or brain states – was compelling me to pick one or the other course of action. It is not, *pace* McGinn, that we are not cognitively equipped to understand how such free action is ultimately reducible to something plausibly causal, like digestion – rather it is that we *are* cognitively equipped to understand that it could not be.

How? Story 2 helps in this case through an absolutely central feature of what it implies, but one which we have not yet had occasion to bring out. While it

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tells us that what we encounter through perception in the external world of nature is the human lifeworld, it significantly does not tell us that that is how *all* of the human lifeworld is to be encountered. For on exactly the same ground of life-formed reflexive consciousness which gives us an objectively determined material world, we must also find ourselves in a real domain of reasons and values, where our freedom of action is perfectly at home.

To make this clear, we need again to analyse the conditions of possibility for reflexive consciousness, this time in its conative or volitional employment. To be motivated is to be aware of a favourable inclination towards some possible action, or to be aware of that action under a favourable aspect. (*Aversion from* an action is just the mirror-image here, to which all that I shall say also applies.) A motivation is thus a content of first-order conative consciousness, as a sensory presentation is a content of first-order perceptual consciousness. Reflexive consciousness in the conative case is awareness of oneself *as* thus favourably inclined, as in the perceptual case it is awareness of oneself *as* having the presentation. In both cases, reflexive consciousness involves a distancing of the self from its own conscious contents, a second-order awareness of awareness, the establishment of a cognitive space in which sensation is turned into perception and motivation into rational action. In the perceptual case, as we have seen, that happens because the basic condition of the possibility of reflexive experience is that our presentations be *representations* of an external objective world. In the conative case, correspondingly, it happens because the equivalent basic condition is that our motivations be radically *normative*.

What that means is that they must be normative all the way down. Despite a long and bad philosophical tradition to the contrary, they must not be confronted essentially as brute impulses or drives arising from the non-rational depths, about which we then ask, in the space or distance created by reflexive consciousness, whether we have reason to act on them. (Still less do we ask merely what, in our given circumstances, it is reasonable to do in pursuit of their satisfaction.) Instead, they must directly incline us in their capacity of reasons counting in favour of action. The experience of *desire* in connection with them must be essentially secondary, a result of focusing in a particular way on the power of a reason. So, for instance, my desire to eat is a kind of special attentiveness to or immersion in my *reason* to eat, which is that I am hungry – I feel uncomfortably empty, and am aware that food would alleviate this condition. It is the strength and psychological dominance of the reason for eating which hunger gives, and not the hunger itself, which constitutes my desire.

A fuller account and a wider context for this claim can be found in Scanlon (1998: 37–50), but, to see why it must be so, we need only register the impossibility of the alternative, or ‘brute impulse’ account, just as we saw the impossibility that reflexively perceptual consciousness could be of purely subjective presentations. It could not be so in that case, because it then could not have emerged as the subjective distinctiveness from those states of the first-order consciousness needed to recognise them *as* potentially changing states. Another way of putting this would be to note that if sensations had been purely subjective, no genuine difference between first- and second-order consciousness could ever have been registered – each would simply be awareness of subjective content. In the conative case, correspondingly, reflexive consciousness of motivation could not be awareness of an *impulsion* or force (or, where motivations conflict, the resultant of such forces) operating brutally in first-order consciousness, because that would swallow up the distinctness or distancing from that consciousness in which reflexivity consists, and which is needed for one’s awareness of oneself as motivated to enable one actually to *do* anything about it. For putatively reflexive awareness of one’s awareness of being pushed or impelled in first-order consciousness simply dissolves into awareness of being so impelled. Consciousness of oneself as having a motivation operating fundamentally as an urge towards action could add nothing to simply being so urged in consciousness – metaphysically, it would be a wheel spinning loose.

Therefore, if reflexive consciousness *of* motivation, as distinct from the first-order consciousness which itself *constitutes* motivation, is to be possible, motivation has to be something which, as far as that first-order consciousness goes, is essentially provisional, in a way in which a force cannot be. (A force just operates – the idea of a provisional or so-far-uncommitted force is self-contradictory.)

This account of reflexive consciousness is thus related to but crucially different from that given by Christine Korsgaard in *The Sources of Normativity*. She there says about reflexive consciousness:

Our capacity to turn our attention on to our own mental activities is also a capacity to distance ourselves from them and to call them into question ... Shall I act? Is this desire really a *reason* to act? (Korsgaard 1996: 93)

My point is that what she calls a *desire* must already be something normative, something in the nature of a consideration bearing on action, for us to have that distancing capacity at all. If it were not, we should *have* no such distance, since ‘attending to’ what could only otherwise be brute impulsion cannot really be distinguished from being brutally impelled, any more than my attending to the force

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of gravity as I fall can register any provisionality, any sort of prompting towards implementation, in my subjection to it. This is only emphasised by kinds of case in which we do *prima facie* seem able to be aware of being consciously compelled. One might find oneself, like Dr Johnson, under some obscure compulsion to touch every lamppost in passing, and still be aware of and indeed annoyed by this condition. But just to the extent that such things are compulsions, we actually find ourselves with no real capacity to ‘distance ourselves from them’, when that goes with ‘calling them into question’. A force, while it can sometimes be evaded, cannot meaningfully be *questioned*.

Now the role of provisional first-order motivation, subject to question, is precisely that which *reasons*, or *norms* (reasons as taken as guidance), or *values* (standing reasons), or *morals* (codified standing reasons applying to interpersonal behaviour) are fitted to play. A reason for action is a consideration counting in favour of the action, which it can only do by being a *general* consideration relevant to the action – ‘It’s nearly four o’clock’ can be a reason for action only in virtue of there being things, such as taking afternoon tea, which one generally does or avoids at four. This generality under which I fall is a consideration *for* the will, but the rule or rational imperative in which it issues (‘Do A because it’s nearly four o’clock’) has to be taken up *by* the will, in order to generate action. (A force just produces movement in what it impacts, but an imperative produces action only by being obeyed.) Reflexive consciousness is then consciousness aware of the need to implement my reasons in order to yield action, so that its distinction from my first-order consciousness, which is just *of* those reasons as normative rules, is preserved.

But consciousness of one’s motivations as reasons must also be, primordially, consciousness of one’s freedom to adopt a reason as rule, to take it up into action or to choose between different reasons. For a reason which one *could not but* adopt would not be a reason but a force operating in consciousness. Thus, the essentially reflexive nature of our conscious experience builds in freedom when it is addressed to action just as it builds in causally-organised objectivity when it is addressed to perception – and it does so on what are evidently closely analogous terms.

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Someone might suggest that objectivity with its accompanying causality is nevertheless basic, because reasoning about action requires reference to a world taken to exist objectively, and thus to be organised by causes. This is true to the extent that reasons have to appeal to plausible objective correlatives – that is, they have

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to make sense in terms of a common world of objects to which they are at least appropriate, in order to be reasons at all. (In normal circumstances George's failure to complete the crossword cannot be the sole reason for his suicide, and this is a *logical* 'cannot'.) But it is also true that the world of objects could not have come properly *into view* if it had not been for the demands of action. If we did nothing for which we needed reasons, and therefore freedom, objectivity would evaporate. Even to be able to change our empirical perspective in such a way as to become aware of different appearances, which is the most basic form of reflexive consciousness, requires that we be always involved in action: a point of view which I never deliberately changed could not generate enough reflexivity even to *be* 'my point of view'. The human world is constituted in both its aspects through the mutual dependence and reinforcement of causality and freedom.

It might further be suggested that causal objectivity must be basic because whatever it is that ultimately gives rise to life and sensation must be wholly independent of human beings, and while the objects in terms of which we frame the world of nature seem to exhibit that independence, reasons, norms and values do not. But normative entities are real, not because they purport to be a 'queer' kind of object with 'to-be-pursuedness' somehow built into them, as John Mackie famously satirised this conception (Mackie 1977: 40), but because their existence, just as much as that of objects, is a necessary condition for the possibility of our reflexively conscious form of experience. To assume that, because the world of nature cannot plausibly contain 'objective values' (which would be as intelligible as supposing it to contain purple values), whatever gives rise to it through our experience of sensation cannot equally give rise to the normative domain through our reflexive experience of motivation, is just a *non sequitur*.

What *is* true is that the normative domain is constituted as an aspect of the specifically *human* lifeworld. Only through reflexive consciousness can there be action on reasons. The stalking tiger can be aware of its distance from its prey, and can take that into consideration when it creeps nearer before pouncing, but the distance does not present itself to the tiger as a reason for closing the gap. We might say that it *has reason* to get closer, and acts accordantly, but it does not act on *a reason which it has*. A reason on which we act is a motivating consideration taken up and implemented, and our reflexive consciousness of motivation as working in this way is where awareness of our freedom necessarily resides. Just *how* we make a free choice – how a decision avoids being either caused or arbitrary and random – is something which can only be clarified when in due course we come

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to consider human creativity. But that we know our own freedom on the same footing and with the same certainty as we know the natural physical world, is clear

For all that, the causal and normative realms are not simply two equipollent aspects of the human lifeworld, like that figure which one sees alternately either as a vase on a black background or as two profiles facing one another on a white background:

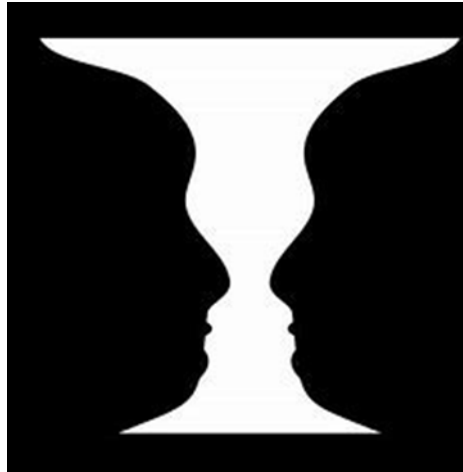


Figure 4. Two Aspects

Here you cannot see both aspects at once (though you can seem almost to do so by flicking between them very fast), and whichever aspect you see is for that time dominant, but we know that the image is not ‘really’ one thing nor the other – neither profiles which we can get ourselves to see as a vase, nor vice-versa. It might seem that, similarly, we focus on the objectual aspect of our life-framed world for commonplace operations on our material surroundings, and also by extension for doing science and for technological applications, while focusing on the aspect of normative freedom for deciding how to behave, whom to reward or punish, what to live for and so forth. Yet there is a vital consideration which no such picture of alternative ‘aspects’ captures. I have presented the normative domain as founded in our awareness of the self as reflexively distinct from its motivations, just as the domain of causal objectivity is founded on our awareness of that self as distinct from its changing sensory presentations. But, in the former case, the self is always aware also of itself as radically *active* – not only as having to take up its rational promptings rather than simply being moved by them as by forces, but as having to construct its encountering such promptings as a transcendental condition of its

conative experience. In relation to the objectual domain, however, this transcendental constructivity is transcendently occluded, in favour of apparently passive registration by the perceiving self of sensory impacts from beyond itself. What attention to the equipollent genealogy of the two 'aspects' reveals is the grounding of this occlusion too (with all its apparent corollary of a universally causal objective realm) in active (that is, living) process.

We are very relevantly reminded here, in fact, of McGilchrist's left-hemisphere world-model noted in Chapter 2, which unless recuperated by the holistic life-awareness of the right hemisphere tends to suppress its own status as a model and take itself for the world. The corresponding danger at the metaphysical, rather than neuroscientific, level is that we try to treat universal causality as applying straightforwardly to the living activity that actually explains and grounds it. This tendency is something to which we shall have to return in subsequent chapters. Meanwhile we can conclude this one by noting that Story 2, which has our relation to both the objective and the normative domains as constructive, makes sense of the normative, and thus of free action, as a fundamental feature of human experience in a way that Story 1, which insists on a prior transcendent reality as spatiotemporally objective, and therefore as causally organised in itself and throughout, does not.

Thus far, then, we have defended the intelligibility and offered grounds for the attraction of Story 2. But where, in broader metaphysical terms, does this really leave us? The next chapter takes up this question.

❧ Chapter 8 ❧

Metaphysical Implications

Direct philosophical support for Story 2, relying on transcendental argument of the kind which we have been exploring, does not proceed by straightforward deductive logic, but appeals as we have seen to intuitions about the necessary conditions of reflexive consciousness – and such intuitions, as well as being somewhat mind-stretching, are admittedly contestable. Can we really not conceive of our sensory representations as implying no external world? – Berkeley, for instance (1710/1962), notoriously thought that he could, although arguably only because he replaced material externality with God. So it may be helpful here to take further bearings on these issues by exploring certain metaphysical puzzles which remain profoundly recalcitrant while one thinks of the world as objective independently of human cognition, as on Story 1. The question will then be whether they become more tractable when we think of that objectivity as constituted by that form of cognition, according to Story 2. I shall briefly consider three such puzzles, relating to measurement, to change and to language and universals.

This chapter is thus easily the furthest we have come from what the reader interested in philosophy from an environmental perspective might have been anticipating; so some reassurance to such a reader may be in order here. It is true that environmental philosophy, even when it has escaped straightforward identification with environmental ethics, has not been wont to concern itself with the metaphysics of space, time or universality. There are exceptions, such as Freya Mathews' Spinozistic holism in *The Ecological Self* (1991), but they are rare; much more typically wider-than-ethical in this connection are excursions into aesthetics, or the philosophies of science or of economics. But the reason why we are now on this perhaps unfamiliar territory is that Story 2 is a naturalist story clearly appealing for a kind of justification which must run very deep. And Story 2 seemingly *has* to be justified, because it offers a field of activity for the deep-ecological intuition that humans do not have the Earth at their disposal or in their keeping but in relation to it are on a radically equal footing with other forms of life. Without such grounding, as I have argued in earlier chapters, that vital intuition is *homeless*: it can find lodgement neither in an empirical world confronted everywhere as resource or standing-reserve, nor in any would-be-extensionist morality. The route through

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metaphysics may therefore be felt to be a long and even a fairly arduous one, but it is not a detour. It is needed for any properly full account of what our radical belonging in life demands of us in terms of addressing the climate and ecological emergency which we face.

The test of this claim can only be the sense which we come to make of these demands later, in the final part of the book – so I would respectfully beg the so far unpersuaded reader to give this chapter a fair chance.

Measurement

Reality considered as independent of how it appears to us must be fully *determinate*. Nicholas Rescher expresses this requirement crisply:

In its nature, reality has to be specifically this or that – and exactly so much of it. An apple tree cannot just have roughly or approximately 50 branches, it must have some particular number of them ... A rock cannot just be ‘roughly a kilo in weight’, it must be a definite weight. Reality itself must be one way or the other – and to just exactly so much of an extent. (Rescher 2010: 36–37)

We can see, too, how the thought here is motivated by following through on the common-sense distinction between reality and appearance; for implicit in this is the possibility of there always being more to reality than appearances suggest (or less to it – appearances can be over-complicated or pretentious). By contrast, however, there can never be in even the slightest degree more or less to reality considered as consisting of things as they are ‘in themselves’ than it actually contains. The idea of something indeterminate, ambiguous as between more or less of this or that, seems to require an explanation invoking the relation of perceivers to object (‘*Why* can’t we be more precise?’), but the in-itself is supposed to be just where such explanation by reference to human perceivers stops. Reality in itself could not contain any kind of vagueness or uncertainty, as Gareth Evans (1978) showed in a famous one-page paper. (Suppose A and B were objects which *in themselves* had fuzzy boundaries; it must then be indeterminate whether or not they were identical, since, given such boundaries, it must be objectively the case that the precise extent of their coincidence, if any, was indeterminable. In that case, however, A for instance would have the property of being indeterminate whether it was identical with B. But B could not have *that* property, since by definition everything however indeterminate must be identical with itself. So by Leibniz’s Law that identical objects cannot differ in their properties, A and B would indeed be determinately

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non-identical, contrary to the hypothesis.) It is only in the domain of appearance that vagueness and uncertainty can figure, because they are features arising from our application of concepts. We can judge something to be about fifteen centimetres long, or to be bluish, or someone to be balding, and these judgements can be satisfactorily true as far as our ordinary activities with such meanings go, but in reality (we cannot help thinking) it must be a matter of precisely *that* length, that shade or that many hairs.

A matter of precisely *that* length: but precisely *what* length (and so on)? With this question, the apparently compelling idea of a determinate reality independent of human perception and practice begins to unravel.

For the simplest kind of case, consider something straight and linear in your present environment: as it might be, the top edge of the page you are now reading. We can say in the light of the foregoing that the edge looks (perhaps) about fifteen centimetres long, while in reality it will have some precise length towards which this estimate points. To that length, indeed, holding a ruler against it and reading off, say, 15.2 centimetres would only approximate more closely, given the ruler's calibration and the discriminative power of the naked eye; with finer calibration and a microscope one could get a length of 15.236 centimetres, maybe – and it is evident that this process of refinement could continue further with appropriate instrumentation. The reason why it could do so, we are inclined to think, is that it would constitute a process of getting closer and closer to the exact length, the precise length which the edge *really* has. (Nor indeed, absent that idea, would it seem that talk of approximation at lower levels of resolution could make sense, since *approximation* implies some target to which we come more or less close.)

Moreover, it is evident that in these thoughts the edge of the page is going proxy for *any* length. Paper is of course a human product, but we can readily apply all that we have said so far to (say) some dead-straight fissure in a rock on one of the moons of Jupiter, something with which humans have had (and hopefully will continue to have) nothing whatever to do, but which just happens to be exactly the same length as our top edge.

Now, however, let us ask: what actually *is* exactness, when it is length which is in question? What is it, 'in itself', to have or be an exact length? One-dimensionally, it must be a matter of 'thus far and no further'. But then what are we to understand by 'thus far', if not 'this *many units* from one end to the other'? And that inevitably presupposes some *metric*, whether centimetres, millimetres or any other. This is the point Berkeley was a good while ago seeking to make when

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he noted, rather misleadingly, that the so-called primary qualities of objects had to be as observer-dependent as qualities like colour and taste, because size or linear distance could be measured in inches, feet or yards (Berkeley 1710/1962: 70). The apparently obvious retort, that these are all alternative ways in which to express an identical real length, only serves to bring out the deeper issue: that there cannot *be* such a 'real length' – that '*thus far...*' simply makes no sense – taken independently of any metric. The idea of a determinate length *implies* some metric or other. Metrics, however, are signifying constructs developed for use in the human practice of measuring, a practice which has been important to us at least since ensuring that my strip of ploughland roughly matched yours started to matter, and probably since we began comparing lumps of mammoth-steak.

Nor can this point be dismissed if we move at the behest of atomic physics to thinking of any object offering measurable lengths as 'really' a congeries of molecules, so that where one side of it 'really' ends varies from instant to instant as these molecules whizz about its lateral vicinity. In that case, exact length becomes a statistical concept – but statistical assessment just as much as simple linear measurement is inescapably a human quantifying practice.

Surely, though, we only have practices of measurement, statistical or otherwise, because we have wanted to organise our activities, with whatever context-relevant degree of precision we may have needed, around some of the various differing real lengths and sizes with which the world presents us. It is not just that the idea of measurement seems to dissolve without something, some given aspect of an object, to be measured – that simply setting forth a linear calibration, as it were, seems no more to be 'measuring' than would be merely holding a metre rule up in the air. The more basic point is that we cannot even think of a linear metric without presupposing some standard length on which to base it, a standard which is to be used in our practice of measurement but which must, *as a length*, precede it. While no doubt, as Wittgenstein observed (1963: 25e), we could not have applied any process of measurement to the standard metre which used to be preserved in Paris in order to confirm that it was still a metre long (since it was, by definition, always a metre long), what we could and did attempt was to keep it under conditions which effectively precluded its varying more than infinitesimally *in length* – and doing that could only have made sense on the assumption that it had *a* length, independently of its role in our practice of measurement, which we firmly intended, for the grounding of that practice, that it should retain.

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The concepts of extension, on the one hand, with its implication of a precise quantitative determinacy inhering in objects independently of human minds and practices, and on the other hand of the measuring practices without which it appears that no such determinacy can be, not just assessed, but *thought*, thus seem condemned to depend on each other in a way that remains wholly baffling while we think of world and mind as metaphysically independent realms.

So how does Story 2, with its claim that the external natural world is always an ongoing construction out of the human form of life and mode of perception, help in this connection? Do not the objects which through this process we have to think of as independently real still have to be thought as independently determinate, in size, shape, length and the rest? How does thinking of (say) objective length as *objectivised* help with the difficulty that length must precede measurement, as such it must exist in itself as exact, but yet exactness of length can only arise in terms of some metric? This raises the question of how on Story 2 we have to think of the space itself in which lengths and sizes subsist.

Our thought-experiment with the melting ice-cube showed that perceptible change requires something which changes objectively – that is, independently of my subjective perceptual states. Thus something other than me must be that *which* changes, that continuant in which its differing states inhere. (There must be something, in this case the ice-cube, which *gets* smaller and smaller until it disappears.) But, as we also saw, that something cannot subsist in time alone, where I encounter only its changes; so it must be thought of as also located in space – as substantively occupying a particular (diminishing) portion of space as it undergoes the form of change involved in its melting. (Nothing, plainly, can either change or remain the same unless, while this is going on, it is always *somewhere* or other.)

Now, however, consider this idea of ‘a portion of space’. If it is essential to objecthood to exist somewhere, that must mean: in some location differentiable from other locations independently of what occupies it. But space as such, taken apart from the objects in it, extends completely uniformly in every direction; so no portion of space seems to be in itself distinguishable from any other, except for where in space it is. But this ‘location’ can only consist in its being *that* portion of space, and something cannot be differentiated from a lot of exactly similar other things merely by being the particular one it is – self-identity is equally a feature which they all uniformly share. (Ordinarily, of course, in cases of exact similarity we do differentiate by location, but here location has been as it were swallowed up in the similarity.) Nor can we say that the portion of space which an object occupies

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is identifiable just as that object's volume, since its volume is simply the amount of space it takes up, and we should be going in a small circle. We seem driven, therefore, to the idea of the space which objects occupy as something *quantised in itself*, so that 'portions' of it can in principle be differentiated by their own unoccupied extent – and that must imply irreducible *units* of space, spatial points lying in three-dimensional array and in themselves adjacent, extensionless and indivisible.

But if we must thus conceive of space as an array of adjacent extensionless points, it is evident that the reason why anything thought of as extended within this array must have (for example) an exactly determinate length, is that it can only begin and end at two such points, having in themselves no extension. What in effect this means is that space, thought of as the domain of objects taken to exist independently of our perception of them, comes *always already calibrated* into these spatial points, even though as such they have only a theoretical existence and cannot be directly counted. It comes, that is, always inherently metricised by our objectivising thought before ever we bring up any kind of ruler against it. There is thus nothing to be wondered at in the fact that we can only express exact length in terms of our practically-intended metrics, which answer in their calibration to the inherent nature of space as constituted through the necessities of our thought about the objects in it. It may then seem no longer such a paradox that mind always meets itself in this aspect of a reality which in objectivising mode we have taken to be mind-independent.

Time and change

Let us turn from space as an essential corollary of substantive continuity to time itself, the medium of change and continuity. Here we find ourselves naturally working with a matching conception. We talk colloquially of something happening 'at a certain point in time', and behind this locution clearly lies the thought of time as a unidimensional array of temporal points or moments, ordered in a relation of succession from earlier to later. Change in an object is then thought of as its being in one state at a given moment, and in a different state at some later moment. And crucially, on this conception, that is all that change *can* consist in – there is no way to think of the earlier state as *passing into* the later, except as the object's being in a series of intermediate states at intermediate temporal points, which simply deletes the issue of its passage from one such point to another. For if we are thinking of adjacent ultimate temporal points or moments, the object can only change from its state at the earlier to its state at the later by *being in* a different state at the later;

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there is by definition no time between these ultimate moments during which we could think of the later state *becoming* what it afterwards is.

But if you watch, for example, flames playing round a log in the fireplace, you are inescapably aware of what is *visibly* continuous becoming. The idea of a sequence of distinct temporal moments, with the flames in a slightly different state at each moment, which also seems to involve them in a kind of spasmodic *jumping* of states from moment to moment, seems almost palpably to misrepresent what is happening. Instead it seems that one has to appeal to the idea of a *flow*, with each state of the flames always passing into the next in a continuous unbroken stream of change.

Pure 'becoming', however, is a transitive relation: if A is becoming B and B is becoming C, A is becoming C. So the state of the flames at the beginning of any temporal interval thought of as a flow would be always becoming the state at the end, and so every temporal interval containing any 'becoming' would collapse into instantaneity. It might seem that one could avoid this conclusion by positing that A becomes B at one temporal moment, and then B becomes C at the next. But it is not really clear what 'A becoming B at a single temporal moment' could mean, since *at* that moment A would have to be both not yet B – otherwise it would have no becoming to do – and already B, since *ex hypothesi* the becoming must have been concluded before the next temporal moment arrives.

Precisely the same challenges to thought arise, it should be obvious, with persistence as with change. If continuity is being in the same condition at different successive points in time (George is asleep at t_1 and asleep at t_2 and still asleep at t_3, \dots) then there seems to be no difference between *preserving* this condition and *replicating* it moment by moment. (Does George *stay* asleep, or just keep dropping off at every successive moment?) And if we respond that this question cannot arise because there is no time between temporal moments, and so no intervenient times when he jerks awake, then the deeper difficulty emerges: how actually does he *stay* asleep over a period consisting only of a succession of distinct temporal moments? The answer cannot, surely, be: by being asleep at each one – because *asleep* (like, for instance, *patient*) is not something that you *can* be 'at a moment', but only over a period. (Try to imagine someone being fully, deeply asleep for a fraction of a second.) Yet that seems to be the only answer which the conception of time as an array of moments can yield.

We can also point out that this momentised conception of time leads directly to McTaggart's (1908) paradox. If we think of an array of points on a single dimen-

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sion, we have to think of each of those points becoming successively *now* in order to be thinking of *time* at all – otherwise we are just thinking of a line stretched out, which is to be thinking of something spatial. But the temporal array (McTaggart's 'B-series' of points thought of as the fixed dates of events) can offer us no meaning of 'successively' except that array itself. Temporal points just as such are already 'successive', purely in virtue of being ordered in an earlier-to-later relation, so they occur successively just by remaining eternally fixed within that relation, as dates do. (25 December is always succeeded a week later by 1 January.) But we needed the idea of a *now* which as it were moved along the points. Nor however can we think of the array itself as moving through a constant *now* (the 'A-series' in which Christmas, like every other moment, is first coming, then upon us, then over). We cannot think this because the array of temporal moments is *time*, and to think of time itself as flowing involves a vicious regress. (Nothing can flow, that is, continuously pass, except *in* time; so for time to flow, we must posit a second-order time in which it does so, and about which the same difficulty will arise again, and so on indefinitely.) So it seems that if we start with an array of temporal points, we cannot think coherently of time at all.

These are evidently difficulties arising directly from the conception of time as such an array. But this conception also seems not optional – it seems rather, like the corresponding conception of space, to be required by the idea of an objective world. If an object occupies a certain spatial location or moves between such locations, it must do so for, or over, a certain period of time – inevitably we think of it as being at L_1 at t_1 , and then at either L_1 or L_2 at t_2 . But as soon as we think of 'periods of time' we have the same issue of differentiation across an absolutely uniform continuum as arose with 'portions of space'. Again, we cannot say that a period of time is just what passes during any completed movement or state of stasis, because *completed* just means concluded within a defined period of time ('was happening before t and afterwards will not be'), and again we are going in a circle. So we are driven once more, and now with time, to quantise in terms of irreducible moments or temporal points – and so, apparently, onto the rocks of the dilemmas just sketched.

How, again, might Story 2 help? Here it enters in a different way. Recall that its direct philosophical justification depended on our being able to distinguish a subjective self as persisting unchanged through awareness of its changing appearances, which in turn depended on taking those appearances to register an objective world. One's awareness of oneself as such a continuant *is* thus one's awareness of

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one's changing appearances in that light. But these changes themselves (recollect again the ice-cube) do not proceed for us with any kind of temporal jumpiness, as one distinct state following another, but with the continuity of *life from within*: each state of our awareness grows out of its predecessor in a flowering or unfolding which like all living process is essentially non-intermittent. (Each phase of the ice-cube literally melts into the next – the cube is not of course living, but the self in which its melting must be apprehended always is.) Nor can we say that this is how change appears because the distinct moments, at which what are really distinct states occur, pass swiftly enough before our attention, as with an old-fashioned cinematic reel, to give the impression of continuous flow. We cannot say this, precisely because our inward experience of change is *primordial* – it is the basis on which, out of awareness of its necessary conditions, we *construct* the objectivised time of temporal moments, to which it therefore cannot be reduced. (We are watching the ice melt, not a cine-film of its melting which we make and play to ourselves.)

While primordial self-continuity intuited in this way must still be distinguished in intuition from its conscious states in order for them to be capable of change, both elements so distinguished remain thus radically prior to objectivised time. And while there is always a tendency to superimpose the objectivised conception when we *think* of any temporal period, always beneath it runs the intuited living continuity of temporal becoming – what Bergson (1910) called *durée* – to which we can always appeal tacitly to recuperate conceptualised momentariness into something habitable by living and growing things: 'Pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*.' (Bergson 1910: 100 – emphasis in original)

Hence, again, it ceases to seem quite such a paradox that perceived change is always lived as a process of becoming which the nature of time itself, considered abstractly, seems to preclude.

Language

The subject calling itself 'philosophy of language' is a comparatively recent development (essentially from the later nineteenth century onwards), but in fact philosophy has always been centrally concerned with issues raised by that human institution. This is wholly unsurprising, since while language is indeed such an institution – a field of human activity organised by rule-governed practices – it also seems involved in the ontological fabric of the world in a way that other human institutions like laws or codes of conduct or political structures are not. And although its formative

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role in relation to the domain of reasons and values seems to go with the character of those entities, which could hardly be grasped, pondered and negotiated except in language, its playing such a role in relation to the domain of nature, of material objects, seems paradoxical. For surely, as regards *those* entities, language must come *after* them: we must think of it as a system of signs through which human beings designate, describe, differentiate and communicate about the natural world, rather than as any foundational part of the being of that world. The paradox, of course, is that no such simple picture will survive much reflection – but equally, some such distinction between words and world must be maintained if we are not to attribute quasi-magical powers to our capacity for speech.

The simple picture breaks down as soon as we try to think about a natural or material *world*. For whether we adopt Story 1 or 2 about how the individual perceiver comes to confront a domain of external objects, the idea of a ‘world’ inevitably goes beyond such confrontation: it involves the further assumption that these objects are not just external to *me*, persisting and changing in what I must recognise as a three-dimensional space over against my subjective registration of it, but are, as the very same objects, also external to you and to others. Thus the space in question becomes a shared or common one, in which through our various dealings with the common objects of our perceptions we can *meet*. On the flat-naturalist account this is how the concourse of already-existent natural objects comes to be grasped as a coherent totality for collaborating human perceivers; on Story 2 it is how the basic object-constituting move made by the reflexive consciousness lodged in individuals is caught up and corroborated in the collective activity of a strongly social primate. And there seems no route beyond the individual perceiver to the necessary commonality except through our being able to meet, as a prerequisite, in *meaning* – that is, through language: through interactions like my saying *rock* or *heavy*, and your recognising me to be indicating what you too take to be a rock, or might find heavy.

Non-linguistic creatures, it will be objected – chimps in the wild, for instance – evidently meet and cooperate with conspecifics on tasks set them by what they must take to be a shared environment. And as a natural extension of that process, a pair of humans can shift a log by each getting hold of an end without any need for speech, or for anything more communicative than primitive gestures – indeed, we must have done this and similar things innumerable times before speech ever evolved, as one of the main behavioural prompts for its evolution. But crucially, just this much can seem not enough for having a world in the way we take fully human

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beings to have one. For that seems to require our sharing an *understanding* that we are collaborating in a public space – our recognising its being there even when we are not meeting in it, and so there as the possibility of meeting for an indefinite range of others (including non-human others). As Gadamer puts this thought:

To have a world means to have an orientation (*Verhalten*) toward it. To have an orientation toward the world, however, means to keep oneself so free from what one encounters of the world that one can present it to oneself as it is. This capacity is at once to have a world and to have language ... Language is not just one of man's possessions in the world; rather, on it depends the fact that man has a world at all. (Gadamer 1975: 443)

How, though, could the world thus depend on language? We can meet, non-spatially, in meaning insofar as I can express a thought (such as 'This is heavy') which you can understand, share, qualify or reject; but the possibility of our doing so already requires a public domain of objects. As Wittgenstein has taught us, there is no stable meaning even for the individual speaker without reference to such public objects. 'Heavy' cannot mean anything if my only standard for whether I am applying it correctly to what now confronts me is my recollection of how I last used it, for then there is no distinction between correct use and what happens to seem to me correct. Rather, it has to mean: what we *agree in finding and calling* 'heavy', which agreement is only possible regarding public objects. Elaborating our shared understanding of what the fully public status of that domain implies evidently depends on our joint use of concepts, and thus on language, but again it seems that we must start with a world of common objects to which language is introduced later.

Here we are trenching on the ancient philosophical question, first thoroughly explored by Plato, of how the particular relates ontologically and epistemologically to the general or universal. The question of how general terms like *heavy* could have emerged from simple interactions around common particular items, as well as the whole broad question about language's role in world-framing, are really both addressing themselves to the nature of this relationship. And it is precisely in the generalising move from my perception of some external particular to my recognition that 'This is *an X*', with all its implications for X's existence in a public realm, that language's world-formative powers are exercised. It will therefore be helpful to recapitulate as briefly as possible the very longstanding issues here.

Suppose, then, that we identify some item in the world by name (this particular cow, for instance, as 'Daisy'); we are talking so far, it would seem, about

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just that item. But if we predicate some property or feature ('Daisy is brown'), we are then no longer talking just about her, but also about a characteristic which as it were reaches beyond her, since it is one which she will share, or always in principle *could* share, with other particular items. So, if we are talking, as we will surely take ourselves to be doing, about an aspect of how the world is when we say that Daisy is brown, but are not talking just about Daisy the particular item, it seems that there must be some other world-feature about which we are also talking, and which it then seems natural to think of as the feature of *brownness*. And if this, which is called a 'universal' in distinction from the 'particulars' which it qualifies, is a feature of the world along with the particular brown items, including Daisy, there is at once the question of how it subsists as such – of *what in the world* it might be. If, in saying of any particular *a* that it is *F* we are not talking about any existent particular other than *a*, what kind of *non*-particular existence do we take *a's F-ness* to have? If *brownness* is in the world, the questions 'where?' and 'how?' present themselves insistently. But if it is not, how does anything get to share in being brown (as both Daisy and the barn door observably do) without *overlapping*, like geometrical figures sharing a common part. It should be emphasised too that universals are not just adjectival; the noun *cow*, for instance, is also a term of this general kind, since it is one by which many different individual items of farm stock can be characterised. Universals, as this demonstrates, are employed everywhere across language in its very nature.

Nor is there any escape from this crux by way of denying genuine reality to brownness – treating it perhaps as just a shadow cast by the logical form of predication. It is certainly true, and significant, that we seem to get closest to the kind of being which universals have when we think of the linguistic relation between predicates and the subjects which they qualify. But we cannot explain properties by appeal to predication, the condition of being red for instance by the applicability of '...is red', because that applicability can itself only be explained in terms of recognition of a particular's having the property in question. The predicate '...is red' can be attached to a vast range of things, but is only *applicable* when attached to some item which actually *is* red: hence the purported explanation is just going in a circle.

But also, and apart from anything which we might *say*, the *very idea* of particularity seems to bring with it quite inextricably that of generality. Without sharing in complexes of general properties, each individual particular would sink into as it were complete ontological anonymity, it would vanish from the world

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as a distinguishable item. Meanwhile the dependence of particulars on universals is even clearer on the standard Russellian view of definite descriptions, where these already trade irreducibly in predicates: to say that the cat is on the mat is on this account to say *inter alia* of some x that it has the property of cat-hood and the relation of being-on to some y which has the property of mat-hood (Russell 1905/1956). Hence if particulars, which we have definite description in order to pick out for reference, are real components of the world (and how could they not be?), then the generality on which they entirely depend and which they incorporate must be as real as they, and thus universals like cat-hood and brownness in some sense real components of the world too.

But how can they be? For if on the alternative, 'nominalist', tack we think of brownness as subsisting only in the form of individual brown particulars, it can seem that to posit brownness or cow-hood as existing in the world alongside all the brown cows would be not just ontologically extravagant but a clear case of category error. Looking past all the cows to find cow-hood seems no different from looking, in Ryle's famous example (1949: 17–18), past all the Oxford colleges to find the university, or past all the players on the pitch to find the team. (The species *cow*, much more plausibly an identifiable entity in the biological world, must be distinguished from *cow-hood*, since Daisy can have the latter property – she can be 'a cow' – but cannot herself have the property of species-hood: she can't *be* 'the species *cow*', she can only enjoy her cow-hood in virtue of being a member of it.) And this is still more evident if we suppose ourselves to be looking past all the red or brown things or all the just actions to find redness or brownness or justice themselves, none of which can claim the even comparative substantiality of species terms.

Now although not presented by Plato in quite these terms, his famous theory of Forms as variously adumbrated in his dialogues *Phaedo*, *Republic* and *Parmenides* among others (Plato ed. Hamilton and Cairns 1961) offered a response to this dilemma – one which attempts to ameliorate it by avoiding the apparent commitment to category-error in thinking of universals as real existents. Since looking for the essence of redness or justice alongside red items or just actions in the world seems to involve such a mistake, we must instead look for them outside the sensible world, taking them to subsist apart from it in an ideal realm of unchanging perfection. This picture undeniably reflects truths about universals which do seem to place them outside the ordinary sublunary realm. *Redness*, for instance, if it exists at all, could not change, since that one characteristic is its whole being

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and with any variation from redness it would simply cease to be; nor, for similar reasons, could it be anything less than fully, that is perfectly, itself – and so for any other universal. That advantage is bought, however, at a heavy price, in view of the notorious difficulties generated in turn for understanding how unchanging Forms are supposed to relate to the changing particulars which instantiate them (difficulties fully appreciated by Plato himself, as the first part of the *Parmenides* makes clear). Are particular red things, for instance, red in virtue of resembling the Form of Red? – but then, resemblance being a reciprocal relation, the Form itself must be red, which makes it one more (albeit transcendental) red thing, and appears by parity of argument to require there to be a further Form in which the essence of redness which it shares with all the other red things can in turn reside, generating an obviously vicious regress. Or are red things red by somehow sharing in the Form of Red? – but then the Form must be either parcelled out amongst them, or else wholly and simultaneously present in each of them, neither of which seems consistent with its subsisting apart in a timeless and presumably also non-spatial transcendent realm of perfection.

Given these difficulties, the Forms can only be regarded as a kind of placeholder for any fully resolved account of universals. But equally clearly, no essentially empiricist account of our knowledge of them will do either. It is no good saying that our conception of *tree*, for example, is formed by abstracting from our experience of all the many and various particular trees which we come across – deciduous and evergreen, bare and leafy, tall and short and so forth – from all of which encounters and memories we attend to a universal ripe for linguistic fixation with the concept-word ‘tree’. Such an account is entirely question-begging, since it could only be our already possessing that concept which could explain our selection of the *particular* particulars – our including the sapling while ignoring the telegraph pole, for instance – from tacitly integrating which we are supposed to derive it.

So how does telling ourselves Story 2 help with these interwoven puzzles? Here we need to recur once again to our reflexive mode of consciousness, and the duality of attention in which it consists. In direct awareness (say, of a log) I am confronted by a *this*, a unique particular item to which I am related in perceiving it. But in my awareness of being aware of it, I am directly engaged with its being as informed by universals – its being *thus*: wooden, heavy, *a* log and so on. All awareness of awareness must proceed in terms of universals, because it is essentially second-order engagement with *how* I am related to what first-order consciousness presents, and any answer to a ‘How?’ question, even simply empirical ones, must

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appeal to the generality which only universals embody. (How do I get to the station? – by going *four hundred yards* along here and then *turning right*, both of which italicised expressions stand for concepts which I must bring to this situation from others insofar as the question is actually being answered.) This universal-investedness which language crystallises and corroborates, which essentially awaits and invites language in the very texture of reflexively conscious experience, belongs always already to objects as a fundamental feature of our mode of encountering them.

Could not this also be true on Story 1? Could not reflexive consciousness be registering the universal-investedness of the material objects which on that story form a natural world preceding humans and independent of them? But that account simply raises again in full force all the puzzle-questions we have been displaying in this section. How, in a world of objects prior to and independent of human experience, could universals like *heaviness* or (to recall our discussion of measurement) *being 15 centimetres long* actually subsist alongside the objects which they qualify, and what, objectively, does this relation of ‘qualifying’ actually come to? We are back here with Plato and his classic wrestle with the inexplicable. These difficulties at least appear to dissolve, however, when we understand the investment of objects with characterising universals as an essential part of the process by which our human life-form constructs an external world of objects. When we recognise the inherent language-aptness of such constructed objects from the moment of their generation – their being necessarily grasped by reflexive consciousness both as particulars and in the characteristics which they present to a consciousness aware of its active particularising – it can seem to belong to their very nature to spring the articulated meanings through which we form them into a conceptualised world.

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What we have now seen is how each of these metaphysical puzzles can at any rate be shifted into a different key, by bringing to bear on them the sense underlying Story 2, its recognition of the world encountered by humans as structurally informed by human reflexive consciousness. But is such shifting equivalent to *resolving* the puzzles, or do they remain, for all that, profoundly puzzling? Exactness of length, for instance, certainly seems to reflect back to us the primordially calibrated space which we have to think as the field of objecthood – but still, must we not also think of that field as having pre-existed and preconditioned the arising of humans to a position of thinking anything, and must it not, as such, have contained from

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its beginning objects with exact dimensions (since as already noted, we cannot suppose objects to be vaguely extended in themselves)?

We can make corresponding points about the other two cases we have explored. Primordial temporality can indeed be illuminatingly referred back to the sense of a living self inherent in reflexive consciousness, as always both sedimented in what is no longer present to it and open to what is not yet present, always as it were 'on the way' as Heidegger (1927/1982) has it, through what immediately 'presences' for it. But is there not presumed in any such evocation of experienced consciousness an appeal to the very idea of momentised time from which all the time-paradoxes stem? – does not 'on-the-way-ness' make sense only as an ongoing 'between-ness' referred to earlier and later time-stretches, and is not one time-stretch earlier than another only by having exhausted all its *moments* before any of those of the later are reached? Equally, we may get a grip on the formal generality of universals by appealing to our reflexive consciousness of experience, since any awareness of being aware of something seems as if it must include some identifiable *characteristic* of that something within its content. But then it is a question whether we can have even primary awareness except in terms of characterising features. It belongs to experience as such to be *differentiated* – to focus on any 'this', it must at least be distinguished from its background; and thus while a subject of experience does not need to say or even think *green* when it encounters the grass, it does need to encounter the distinction of the grass from the adjacent pavement (say), which means it needs to perceive it at least as presented *x*-ly while the pavement is presented *y*-ly – and these are evidently just place-holders for universals. (To put it another way: any particular encountered simply as 'this' cannot be distinguished from any other so encountered, so that a mere stream of 'this-es' could not get even as far as being experienced.) Here, the basis of universality would seem to inhere simply in the primitive awareness of difference which must go with any conscious experience, even before the human-specific reflexivity which triggers the articulation of universals into language had arisen. And a merely differentiated world is presupposed as much by Story 1, on which language is a contingency which might never have come about, as by Story 2 on which it is deeply implicit in the world's reality.

It emerges, then, from these latter considerations that what we have been doing in each of these metaphysical cases is further exhibiting and exploring that very basic feature of the two stories which we noted when first introducing them, and referred to colloquially as their 'taking in each other's washing'. If we try to give an account of the material world in terms of features like extendedness, temporality

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and generality which it is to be thought of as having in itself and which human consciousness subsequently registers (Story 1), we are embroiled in difficulties with understanding those features which all arise from the attempt to conceive of them as subsisting independently of that consciousness. But each appeal to human consciousness as constitutive of these fundamental world-features (as in Story 2) is found to trade on their pre-existing and conditioning the constituting process itself. Or, to put this more bluntly: the material world makes sense only as constituted by mind, but the only existence we can coherently constitute its materiality as having is as objectively mind-independent.

It is indeed no accident, but given with our condition, that telling ourselves Story 1 about our evolutionary history in the world leads to telling ourselves Story 2 about the dependence on our evolved form of life of the fundamental structures that we read into that world, recognising which as fundamentally over against us leads us back into Story 1. For a life-form which must, like all other such life-forms, operate within its lifeworld or *Umwelt* as its *reality*, but which uniquely among life-forms can also recognise what it is doing, and thereby recognise what it must nevertheless take as reality to *be* life-formed, is condemned by its very mode of being to inhabit paradox. Humans are 'natural aliens', to use the striking term deployed by Evernden (1985), but not, as he suggests, because they are 'exotics' without an ecological niche; rather their alienation belongs at the roots of their existence as reflexively conscious. It follows that if what I have called 'deep naturalism' consisted simply in *replacing* the flat-naturalistic or two-dimensional ontology of Story 1 with Story 2's picture of human consciousness as structurally constitutive of the objective world, it would be a permanently unstable because an always inherently paradoxical and self-undermining position. While Story 1 by itself is untenable, Story 2 as a mere substitute for it is, like everything implying paradox, ultimately *unstateable*.

Does what I have wanted to call deep naturalism not, therefore, make sense? Or can something properly to be called understanding consist in recognising and accepting the dialogical inter-recuperativeness of these two pictures, for which of course we need both? Could the world be the human lifeworld, not because we can come to rest in any *proposition* to the effect that without humans it would not be there, but because to grasp its structural framing we have to appeal to necessities reflecting our human life-form, to understand the emergence of which as a life-form we have to frame the world as independently pre-existing life and all its

forms, to understand which framing in any depth we need to invoke the human world ... and so on round?

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Before addressing that question, it is worth further illustrating the idea that being bound to inhabit paradox is inherent in the human condition. This I do by considering what might be called the Phenomenologist's Heresy, in two of its versions.

Phenomenology, as I noted in the Introduction, looks to ground our understanding of the world in the *intentionality* of human experience – its inherent 'aboutness' or 'directedness-towards'. Our experience, whether in perception or in other modes such as belief, emotion or attitude, always *envisages* a world: my perceptual awareness is *of* objects, my irritation is *at* someone's remarks or behaviour, my belief is *in* the truth of some proposition, my hope is *that* some event or other will transpire. The reflexivity of our form of consciousness, its awareness of its own activities of awareness, is essential to this experienced directedness: I am always at least tacitly aware of *my* being visually or tactilely addressed to the object, *my* registration of the irritant, of hope as entertained *by me* regarding some possibility. Our awareness, that is, is always of a world of things and transactions objectively over against us and in large measure independent of our attention to it, and at the same time of an ongoing experiencing of that world which has an ineliminably subjective or perspectival reference. And with this duality there goes irresistibly the thought that we come at that objective world only *through* its being envisaged in perspectival experience. (To be given it *directly*, as it were, would have to be to pay an impossible attention to it from nowhere, or from all aspects at once, whereas it is definitive of our experience to be always aspectual.) It is from this recognition that the phenomenologist takes off; as Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012: 267) classically expresses it: 'We must gain access to a world through [the] individual perspective and by way of it. Thus, this must first be described.' The heresy, however, is precisely this idea that we can indeed 'describe' our experience considered thus subjectively, as putting us on the way to grasping the world's objectivity and therefore as in some sense logically prior to it.

The Husserlian, or more traditional, version of this heresy harks back to the thought first given powerful philosophical prominence by Descartes, that we can be certain of our ideas even while the question of their veridicity remains suspended (in his case, by his methodology of general Doubt):

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if [ideas] are considered only in themselves and are not referred to any other thing, they cannot, strictly speaking, be false: for whether I imagine a goat or a chimera, it is no less true that I imagine the one than the other. (Descartes 1641/1968: 115)

Husserl's attraction to this Cartesian approach led him to think that he could develop scrupulously methodical analyses of the contents of consciousness purely from the first-personal perspective, while 'bracketing' any question of whether or not there were real, consciousness-transcending objects answering to those contents. This 'bracketing' is the phenomenological 'reduction' or *epochē* (the ancient Greek sceptical term for withholding assent or dissent) which he deploys in thought-experiments aiming to isolate experience-contents for attention as such. For example:

Let us suppose that we are looking with pleasure in a garden at a blooming apple-tree ... From the natural standpoint the apple-tree is something that exists in the transcendent reality of space, and the perception as well as the pleasure a psychical state which we enjoy as real human beings ... Let us now pass over to the phenomenological standpoint. The transcendent world enters its 'bracket'; in respect of its real being we use the disconnecting *epochē* ... And yet everything remains, so to speak, as of old. Even the phenomenologically reduced perceptual experience is a perception of 'this apple-tree in bloom, in this garden, and so forth', and likewise the reduced pleasure, a pleasure in what is thus perceived (Husserl 1931: §88)

– which 'remaindered' experiences he then purports to study in their 'eidetic' essences.

But against this kind of 'reduction' to describable but essentially first-personal experience there is surely an objection along lines that should be familiar from the later Wittgenstein. As we have already noted a few pages back, he shows that a private language could not get as far as genuine meaning (and so, *be* a language) because it provides no criterion for the correct or incorrect applications of terms, so that if I ask myself whether *red*, for example, is the correct term for *this* colour-experience, all I have to go on are my own memories of my previous applications of the term, about which, evidently, precisely the same question can be asked, so that ultimately 'whatever is going to seem right to me is right' (Wittgenstein 1963, §258). But similarly, we cannot from the purely individual perspective get as far as genuine conscious *experience*, because this kind of purported encounter would not allow logical room for the question of whether or not the intentional contents of such putative experience were being correctly recognised. This is especially clear in the foregoing example, where the remaindered experience is supposed to be both

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perceptual and emotional conjointly. For suppose I were to ask how I know that, under ‘bracketing’, it is indeed the *same* pleasure which ‘remains ... as of old’, rather than a feeling mutated into something like the aesthetic pleasure with which I might regard a pictured tree? The question might even arise as to whether *pleasure* was the right description at all for an ‘emotion’ associated with the experience *as of* an apple-tree; why should I find that particular mental content pleasurable to contemplate, any more than I should feel mental hunger in the presence of a purely mental bacon sandwich, or – Heidegger’s example (1927/1982:63) – take even bracketed care not to fall out of a bracketed window? The natural connecting conditions apart, these associations can seem simply arbitrary. In the real world, of course, we have common usage, the *practice* of emotion-language and other kinds of reference appropriate to trees, windows or sandwiches, to which appeal can be made in response to any uncertainty over characterising my feelings, but here any such criterial appeal to usage must also have been bracketed. Hence, again, whatever is going to seem right to me will be right – which means, as Wittgenstein notes after making the point quoted above, that ‘here we can’t talk about “right”’. But that in turn means that the descriptive terms *pleasure*, and by the same token also in fact *apple-tree*, cannot legitimately be carried over to identify remaindered ‘experience’ in the way that Husserl proposes.

What emerges here is that we can only think in a genuinely meaningful way about our experience by *not* bracketing, but rather embracing, reference to what it objectively yields for us – even though when thinking of it as experience we must acknowledge its subjectivity, its directedness-from-me and essentially perspectival configuration. When we attend to our experience it is always as on the way to grasping the objective reality of its contents, which reality, however – or, in the case of ‘objects’ like the chimera assembled imaginatively, which contributing realities – we do not have describable experience to attend to without having already grasped as real. And here we plainly have just the same pattern of unstateable understanding as is exhibited by our iterative cycling between Stories 1 and 2 about our relation to the natural world.

Nor is this position avoided by the Heideggerian move away from Husserl’s conception of subjectivity to a claim that human experience is engagement in a real world which is always ‘disclosed’ only in and to that practical engagement, and cannot be encountered apart from it. Heidegger seems to be offering in effect the critique of his predecessor’s approach set out in the foregoing paragraph when he comments (1927/1982: 64) that

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the mode of being of our own self ... is essentially such that this being, so far as it *is*, is always already dwelling with the extant. The idea of a subject which has intentional experience merely inside its own sphere and is not yet outside it but encapsulated within itself is an absurdity.

What he offers instead is a picture of human subjectivity not confronting ideas in pure consciousness but always ineliminably constitutive of the real-world things with which it lives by having practical dealings. Thus, take for example an ordinary feature such as a hill, which can be engaged with in different ways by different subjects of experience, and suppose we ask: is there *objectively* here the unitary object which presents itself as a challenge to the hill-walker, or the layered multiplicity of objects (the accumulated strata) which are presented to the investigating geologist? The convincing aspect of Heidegger's point is that no answer to any such question about objects can discard *all* practical human perspectives (even getting down to the congeries of rock-constituting molecules being only to answer from the perspectives of the chemist and physicist), and thus that the intentional directedness towards the world which characterises human being (*Dasein*, or being-in-the-world, as he calls it) is always a necessary condition of there being for us a world of objects as such. But here the heresy lies in assuming that there can be a *perspective* on something which only exists as a disclosure to or for that perspective. The idea, however, cannot be used in this way – a perspective has, as a matter of logic, to be *on* something conceived of as independently there. The different perspectives of geologist and hill-walker are only possible because they are directed to something that must be taken to have independent objective being, even if the only grasp on any such being that we can get is from one or another perspective of practical 'comportment'. As Gilbert Ryle put this point in an early review of *Being and Time*, with Heidegger's classic example of the hammer in mind,

the attempt to derive our knowledge of 'things' from our practical attitude towards tools breaks down: for to use a tool involves knowledge of what it is, what can be done with it, and what wants doing. (Ryle 1929/1976: 63)

Human being, that is, can only consist in the intentional 'comportment-towards' which Heidegger identifies as that without which things cannot take on being, if there are already things taken as there to be so dealt with. I cannot think about my experience as 'disclosing' a world, without referring that experience to a world already disclosed.

So here again, we have a story about the world's human-dependent existence which cannot be told without turning into one about objectively independent exist-

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ences, which however can only be told meaningfully from some human perspective, and so on round. Both Husserl and Heidegger in their different ways seek to ground the objective world in experiential phenomena which must be taken both to construct and to presuppose it. A brutally realist picture in which the apple-tree or the hill have real existence just in themselves and beyond the human purview appears untenable, but the purported phenomenological alternatives turn out to be inherently unstateable. And the heresy, to repeat, is not a matter of identifying the ineliminable contribution of human subjects to the objectivity of the world, a subtle and sensitive exploration of which is phenomenology's strength, but lies in insisting on trying to capture that contribution *propositionally* – as Husserl does with his intricate analyses supposedly laying bare meaning-relations among pure subjective *noemata*, and Heidegger with his baroque armature of terms of art for aspects of practical intentionality. But all we really have here, as the strained character of both these strategies in fact reveals, is the same unstateability as confronts us in the way our two stories are involuted together.

Making sense of deep naturalism

So we come back to the question of whether deep naturalism makes sense, which raises what we have now seen as the more general question of what *kind* of sense it could make: that is, of whether we can really understand what turns out to be unstateable because it involves paradox essentially.

One sense that it is important to note at this point that deep naturalism cannot therefore make, is as a straightforward explanation or justification of our bio-egalitarian intuition that all life, or at any rate all conscious life, stands on an equal footing. We evidently cannot justify that intuition (which as we saw has no genuine locus in morality) simply by advancing Story 2, which has the human lifeworld as our *Umwelt* just as bat-world is the bat's and so forth, because, as we have also seen, Story 2 brings with it Story 1 according to which humans are uniquely equipped both to understand and to intervene in an objective world within which they dominate over all other creatures. The relation between our intuition of radical equality and the idea of the world as lifeworld has to be more complex than that. Rather, what we should say is that the intuition, along with related attitudes and dispositions including 'respect for life', fear of human hubris, precaution in technological contests and a strong sense of intergenerationality, intimates a way of human being in and towards the natural world, of which deep naturalism represents as it were the outcropping in metaphysical terms – that is,

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in terms of the ontology of human vis-à-vis other kinds of natural being. At that level, it is a matter of taking the world in its objective spatiotemporal and causal organisation as something which can only be *thought* as the lifeworld of our reflexively conscious form of life, but which *as* so thought must be taken to have existed in space and time long before its causal processes slowly gave rise first to life, then to primate species and eventually to reflexively conscious humans. It is a matter, fundamentally, of our *finding* the world to have the necessary structural characteristics that our human sensory-cognitive set-up *brings to* it. But this is a relation between us and the world which evidently defeats propositional thought. Whatever might be the case with Kant's formula of 'empirically real and transcendently ideal', or Schopenhauer's of 'no object without a subject and vice-versa', once we are engaged with the naturalised post-Darwinian version of the basic claim, this defeat becomes glaring – those formulations may be sayable within the carefully elaborated framework of transcendental idealism, at least until one presses hard on them, but 'evolutionarily preconditioning the human life-form *and* dependent on that life-form for coherent existence' palpably is not.

The root difficulty here, of course, is with the very idea of a life-formed *reality*. A real world of natural or physical objects must be a world some of the objects comprising which must be thought of as existing independently of humans. Obviously it is also full of objects, such as the Forth Bridge and Donald Trump's hairpiece, which humans have fabricated, but there must also exist the objects and materials out of which everything artificial has finally been made, and indeed those out of which we ourselves are made – and such objects cannot be thought of as depending for their existence on us. In the nature of the very idea of reality, that is – of what Bernard Williams (Williams 1975: 64) called 'what there is *anyway*' – there are broad swathes of it which humans have to *find* – to discover or come across. This is of course the principal impetus behind our telling ourselves Story 1, on which natural objects have a prior material existence. Yet, as well as all the countervailing recommendations of Story 2 which we have been reviewing, there remains the old Kantian objection to that picture. If objects were spatiotemporal and causally organised *in themselves*, as pre-existing, they would have to be so necessarily; they could not *happen* to be so, because spatiotemporality and causality are a precondition for anything at all to happen – but necessity arises only with us.

Some cosmologists are inclined to challenge that claim about spatiotemporality because of the difficulties it poses for the concept of the Big Bang. If this, supposedly the mother of all Happenings, had to occur in pre-existing space, for

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instance, because that is a necessity for any happening, the old question of why it happened at the particular point in space where it did and not at any of the (then) absolutely equivalent other points, threatens always to become embarrassing. So the idea is canvassed that the Bang was not actually an explosion *in* space but the explosion *of* space (corresponding accounts being offered of time). This, as regards space, yields an image cited by the popular cosmological writer Paul Davis (2007: 29): ‘The expanding universe is like a currant bun swelling in the oven, with the currants playing the role of galaxies and the dough representing space.’ But this picture is quite incoherent. Space cannot expand, because ‘expansion’ means getting bigger, which means occupying more and more *space* – something which a ‘space’ that is at any given moment all the space there is cannot be supposed to do (since it always occupies 100% of itself). We might on the currant bun model take there to be ‘more space’, absolutely speaking, at each subsequent moment. But this is not *expansion* any more than there being, say, more amusement as I see further and funnier aspects of some situation would constitute expansion. Only something which does indeed exist in space can expand, because space is necessary for the existence of anything *expandible* – to see which one does not, importantly, have to be a cosmologist, but only someone who recognises how the deeply misleading idea that physics could ultimately explain *everything* has latterly taken pernicious possession of our culture.

But then, if objects are necessarily spatiotemporal, the Kantian point stands: while we can find things to be thus and so, we cannot find them to be incapable of being otherwise – ongoing experience of them simply cannot show this, because anything we find empirically to be the case is always open to revision in the light of our next discovery, and fundamental necessities just could not be like that. Thus the world of nature must be real for us in the sense of supporting the empirical distinction between what we find and what we fabricate, but considered in its necessary lineaments it must be constructed, because the conditions of our cognising it are the only intelligible source of such necessity. Necessity is the impossibility of being otherwise; but in a world outside the scope of reflexive consciousness, a world lacking ‘thus-ness’, there is no otherwise-ness available for things not to be – they just are as they are.

But how can the world of nature really be constructed, if that is the work of our human form of life? – for any life must be already a natural phenomenon. To put this question in terms of the account of that process given in Chapter 7: the objective world for us is grounded in our reflexive consciousness of *sensation*,

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which necessarily presents itself to such consciousness as representative of spatio-temporal objects in causal relations. But how are we to think of sensation itself arising, except as the responsiveness of a living being to something which affects it? And our only idea of being so affected seems to be that of external objects impinging (which must mean, causally) on a particularly disposed sensorium. So a real world of causally-active objects seems already required for the setting up in us of the process through which the real world of causally-active objects is supposed to be constructed. We have to think of ourselves as finding waiting for us what we also have to think of ourselves as bringing forth. (This is, of course, only a naturalistic reworking of a famous Kantian crux concerning the existence and nature of 'things-in-themselves' as grounding appearances, where that grounding relation is meant to precede causality without being merely logical. As is notorious, many contemporary and subsequent commentators on the first *Critique* have held that here we do already trespass beyond what is really sayable.)

So are we then stymied? The ideas that explanation invoking reality must stop with the phenomenal, and that where it must stop *is* ('only') phenomenal, seem to be in destructively irresolvable tension, in the sense that their conjunction defeats propositional thought. But is there any alternative template of intelligence on which that conjunction might be understood? And it would be crucial that this should be, indeed, a template of *intelligence*. Given how centrally important I have argued it to be for the future of human and much other life on Earth to establish a robust basis and real socio-political potency for the profound bio-egalitarian intuition, there is nothing to be gained from appeal here to any kind of faux-inclusive Whitmanesque insouciance in the face of paradox,¹ nor to the crude pragmatism which takes metaphysical concern to be in any case merely the province of nit-picking intellectuals. We have to make sense of deep naturalism through directing recognisable *thought*, that is, fully human intelligence seeking to grasp the real, on the paradoxical and therefore propositionally unstateable relations of humanity to its enviroing world.

Such thought actually lies ready to be deployed in our everyday exercise of the creativity which we share with all living things and with life itself. But that exercise is so pervasively and intimately embedded in our lived experience that it

1. Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself,

(I am large, I contain multitudes).

Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself', from *Leaves of Grass* (Whitman 1915: 93).

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is peculiarly hard to bring to focal recognition. My enterprise, however, of making sense of deep naturalism commits me to attempting that, and the following two chapters seek to do so.

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The unstateability of deep naturalism pivots on the conviction that we cannot find (that is, encounter over against us as independently real) what we are also central to creating. There are various other ways of formulating this conviction, which all come down finally to the same thing: we cannot produce a precondition of our producing anything; we cannot *endow* anything with characteristics which were really there all along; what prompts us to construct cannot be the construction at which we arrive ... These impossibilities seem, for abstract thought, to be simply unchallengeable. *But our lived experience of creativity, in our lives and in life itself, challenges them all.* Attention to that experience thus invokes the alternative template of intelligence on which deep naturalism must be understood.

At this point, however, certain methodological remarks are called for. What seems for abstract thought unchallengeable may be summarised as this self-evident proposition: nothing can *bring itself forth* – that is, precede and inform the process through which it comes to exist. For that to be self-evident, of course, we have to interpret it in the right way. It does not deny, for instance, that a blueprint or construction plan can precede and inform the process through which it comes to be realised as an actual building; nor does it deny that a subsequent building can be constructed deliberately as an exact replica of an earlier one. What it denies is that an actual building, or anything, can constitute a guide to *its own* construction – which is what we seem required to think of as happening on the deep naturalist account, where apparently there has already to be the reality within which the human life-form arises, for that life-form to construct any objective reality.

Now plainly, any attempt to rescue deep naturalism for intelligent understanding by *disproving* that summary proposition would be fatuous. Its self-evidence stems from that of the underlying proposition that an effect cannot precede its cause, which in turn is self-evident because that would require the event or existence constituting the effect to have emerged wholly independently of what *ex hypothesi* it depends on, which would contravene a fundamental law of logic ('Not both p and not- p '). But the fundamental laws of logic have to be presupposed in proving or disproving anything, so there is no challenging by logical argument what simply channels or expresses them.

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What it is nevertheless open to us to do, however, is to provide ourselves with reminders of how a wide range of activities which we both encounter and engage in as a matter of course, processes running through the whole warp and weft of human life and beneath them to the active structure of life itself, exhibit a profound characteristic which we find ourselves having to understand as powerfully subverting that claim which we nevertheless cannot disprove. That characteristic, I have suggested, is creativity. It manifests itself not just where we might tend first to look for it, in the production of and response to works of art, but also in our ordinary day-to-day self-expression and in our whole relation to the language into which we are born and in which 'we have vital relations with other human beings' (Leavis 1975: 42). Again, it appears not just in the agency through which we realise ourselves as the sources of our actions, and endow our lives with the purposes on which we rely for our guidance through them, but also in the very way that life-forms themselves are instantiated as telic patterns in individual living things. It appears, under all these guises, as what it seems only apt to call the *active principle of life*. As such, it demands to be taken with philosophical seriousness. We are very clearly not talking here about something epistemically or ontologically marginal. And everywhere, taken thus seriously, it calls on us to express its force and effect in terms which challenge the truth-functional logic where 'Not both p and not- p ' rules.

This and the following chapter will explore, in an inevitably cursory way, each of those domains of self-reminder. Considering the upshot of such an approach for the basic paradox of deep naturalism, which we shall still not have *proven* to be non-paradoxical, is best left to the end of this exploration, and we shall return to it at the end of Chapter 10.

Creativity in art

The arts, it might be supposed, exhibit human creativity most conspicuously. In present conditions, however, they are also the area in which a misleading sense of what it involves can very readily take root. For the scrambling confusion of contemporary culture means that anyone who produces poetry or fiction (or at any rate gets his or her productions published), along with anyone who daubs a canvas or yammers into a microphone, is likely to be called a 'creative artist' – an absolutely vital term being thus placed in danger of becoming almost unusable. In this context, therefore, it will be advisable to start with a very small-scale and manageably focused example of the real thing, in order to establish from the outset its bearing on the approach which I have just outlined.

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Consider, then, the following: it is the opening stanza of Philip Larkin's poem 'Church Going', a piece I choose for its accessibility, in the sense both that it is much anthologised and easily to be found on the internet, and also that Larkin's common-language register and favoured ordinary-blokeish persona appeal to a fairly wide spectrum of modern readers.

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
 I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
 Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
 And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut
 For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
 Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
 And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
 Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
 My cycle-clips in awkward reverence...

(Larkin 2013: 58)

Let us now ask: does that *tense* in the seventh line capture a condition of the silence or of the visitor? Does it align with *musty*, characterising an aspect of how the empty church is in itself, its slightly damp and not-much-used smell, or with *unignorable*, expressing a reaction to its noiselessness? The answer is, of course, both: it hovers between, as a waiting watchfulness in the silence which is also the visitor's slightly awkward wariness, his combination of post-religious detachment (the altar is just 'the holy end') with evidently seeking something (this is not just a church, but '*another* church'). The ambivalence here is what gives that suddenly striking resonance to 'God knows how long' in the next line – the idiomatic disclaimer turning into a startling candidate for literal truth (God, if there were a God, would indeed know precisely how long).

Noting this complexity, as we intuitively do in the kind of attentive reading I have just rehearsed explicitly for comment, is also to note that this seventh line is the point at which the stanza comes alive: the point where it stops being an enumeration of items noted and becomes – what? The transition here is at any rate analogous to a shift from just being told *about* something, to actually registering it directly for oneself. In actively realising the dual valency of *tense* as we take that sequence of adjectives, we are effectively present at (or in) what is being evoked here, whereas up to here we have been essentially spectators through the visitor's eyes. Now, though, we are ourselves engaged, by the poet's skill, in objectivising his visiting wariness, a process familiar enough from common experience. (Think, for instance, of how in 'eerie' surroundings one's nervousness cannot help finding

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something to be nervous about. We know that the brisk, no-nonsense either-or – ‘Either there really is a ghost, or it’s all in your mind!’ – does not meet the case here.) It becomes irresistible, in fact, to say that this line represents the poem’s establishing its envisaged situation as a living *reality* for the reader.

But is not that term just a metaphor for imaginative vividness achieved by deft poetic means? We are not *really* (‘literally’) in an empty church, are we? – merely reading a poem about it. Here one puts one’s finger on the nub of creativity as it characteristically manifests itself in any poetry worth reading. For ‘experience’ is not just sensation realised as perception, but always also the multiple significances with which we constantly interweave it. (I *see* the vase of roses on my desk, and I *see in* it my wife’s kindness in quietly putting it there to cheer on my intellectual labours, and both awarenesses inseparably comprise ‘the experience’ I have – only artificially and in abstract thought can the first element be detached and prioritised.) In ‘ordinary’ experience, however, such significances are very often blurred and muddled, glimpsed only confusedly, and there can be longish tracts of existence where they seem to vanish altogether, leaving one with just one blank perception after another. The suddenly concentrated significance in that word *tense* – the way its placing both realises and focuses the sensed ambivalence between reaction and what is there to be reacted to – means that in fact, as we read, we are much more sharply aware of ‘being there’ than we almost certainly should have been had we ‘really’ been there. That there is no simple or clear-cut distinction to be drawn between ‘reality’ and imagined experience is after all the *point* of poetic creation.

How does any of this work to subvert the impossibility of something’s preceding and informing the process through which it comes to exist? What we have here, at the point where the stanza comes alive with reality, is the visitor, and through him oneself as reader, really *finding* in the church’s silence the expectancy which has been *brought to* it. And this, if one reads on – it is well worth looking up the poem, which I cannot quote here in full – is the key to the whole. The empty church draws Larkin, it turns out (as the tone shifts from discursive to reflective)

...because it held unpilt
 So long and equably what since is found
 Only in separation – marriage, and birth,
 And death, and thoughts of these...
 A serious house on serious earth it is,
 In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
 Are recognised, and robed as destinies.

(Larkin 2013: 59)

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It is a place where, even if for us its formal religious functions have effectively lapsed, our need for life to make sense can still somehow be transformed – in that ‘blent air’ which is the tense silence again – into a significance which we feel that we both *find*, and can accept as *given*, without any kind of self-deception going on. We make the sense we find but also find the sense we have made, and this activity, defying any truth-functional logic, is experienced as irresistibly real in the mode to which that brilliant way with *tense* has introduced us in crisp miniature. (The poem is as much *about* human creativity as it is an exemplification of it.)

I have dwelt on poetic creativity, because it is the easiest kind to demonstrate for such discussion, operating in the medium (words) in which it also requires to be explored. But a briefer example from music will serve to suggest how what I have just illustrated is general across the arts. Poetry can create a complex logic-defying reality, as we have seen, by bringing significant experience to vivid life – it does this through the poet’s and reader’s own living investment in the sounds, textures and rhythms as well as the diverse meaning-potentialities of words. Music can create living reality too, but being non-semantic, it does so (when it does) through a direct relation to life. This can be brought out with the necessary focussed brevity if we recall a famous scene from Peter Shaffer’s play *Amadeus*, adequately represented for present purposes in the 1984 filmed version, the relevant clip from which can be found on YouTube.¹ Salieri, Court Composer to the Emperor of Austria, has composed a short March of Welcome for the introduction to the sovereign of his fellow-composer and soon-to-be-rival Mozart, newly in Vienna. This piece, Salieri being fairly uninspired, is a stilted formal exercise – but Mozart, the transcendent musical genius, note-perfect from having heard it just the once, immediately re-plays it from memory, then begins experimenting with it, changes an interval and thence improvises happily (if completely tactlessly, in front of Salieri himself) into a brilliant tune of his own – actually ‘Non più andrai’ from *The Marriage of Figaro*, although that is beside the point here. We hear him, it is irresistible to say, in the very process of *breathing life* into Salieri’s routine and mechanical piece, turning it into something vibrant with energy, surprisingness and originality – the essential characteristics of life itself. Music with these qualities, we cannot help registering here, gives us *reality* by giving us the very nerve of life in immediate apprehension.

It might be supposed that, nevertheless, being non-semantic, pure music could not subvert any logic in the creation of that reality. But music with the qualities we hear Shaffer’s imagined Mozart actively imparting to it subverts *time*

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1HFY7KG2Y9k>

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and the causal logic going with it. A living phrase or tune changes its shape and texture to our ear as it open-endedly unfolds, so that as a constituted whole it reconfigures its emergent sequentiality backwards (and thus counter-causally) as we hear a changed beginning and development in its completedness. (This is just what Salieri's essentially inert piece fails to do – as Shaffer has Mozart say while playing it through, "The rest is just the same, isn't it?") We have already caught a glimpse of what is involved here in the previous chapter, while considering our living apprehension of change. Music, or at any rate significant music, is our most vivid direct expression of that primordial being-in-life, from which abstracting thought erects the temporality and causality in terms of which the creative process just illustrated ought to be impossible.

Creativity and expression

Creativity is unmistakably encountered in the experience of genuine art. It is equally important to recognise it as essential to the expressive process itself, the process of bringing an idea or prompting to formulation, not only in the arts but in ordinary thinking and also in more structured fields of thought like scientific theorising.

As a transition from the arts to exploring creativity in these contexts, consider the painter. He or she will have an initial idea for a painting, a subject which calls for realisation in what comes down to shaped and contrasted blocks of colour on a two-dimensional surface. But it is only as these begin to emerge under the brush that the idea will take on sufficient specificity, as informing the ongoing work of application, to guide and control the transformation of juxtaposed colour into significant arrangement. And this is so even when the painting is representational, of some person, object or view, because the painter's guiding idea is not merely perceptual but interpretive: it is what he or she is seeking to *make of* that subject, the tone and atmosphere and emphases to be conveyed, which clarifies itself in the making. Here we can see from the artist's perspective the process which the viewer or hearer rehearses in reverse, as it were, when taking what is communicated in the painting or hearing the development of a melody.

But this process, once we can recognise it, can also be recognised as characteristic of all expression. This is something, in fact, which anyone knows who has ever really *made* anything, from a sentence to a symphony. Think about just trying to say or write something important, something which it matters for some reason to put clearly and effectively. You have a prompting, a sense of something had in mind and of where you need to go with this, and that prompting attracts to itself

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an atmosphere of expression and maybe some provisional words, but the words will not be *right* (if they are they will very likely be not your thought, but mere echoes of someone else's). The ways in which they are felt not to be right recast and sharpen what the prompting actually was – and then suddenly, in answer to that clarified intuition, the right words are there, they seem to have been *given* you. What we have here is not a causal sequence in which a state of mind (an intention, an inkling or whatever) calls up as output a choice of expression. It is not surprising that the eighteenth century, in its first flush of Newtonian enthusiasm, supposed that you first had a thought and then let that thought prompt you to choose apt words in which to frame it –

Expression is the dress of thought, and still
Appears more decent as more suitable,

as Pope classically put this idea (1711/1966: 73) – but that whole picture always was radically misleading. Rather, what you say both follows from your thought and *is* your thought. In a *sui generis* process of realisation, what is forthcoming *shapes itself out*, that is to say, conditions its own becoming. This pattern of bringing-forth is true of all serious making whether in craft or art or intellectual endeavour or committed relationship. (Our marriage expresses the bond between us which it ongoingly establishes and confirms.) But that nothing can condition its own becoming is just another way of formulating the 'self-evident proposition' which our very ordinary experience of creativity thus subverts.

It does so too in the more formally organised thinking activity that constitutes scientific work. The scientist's endeavour is to express the observed phenomena or data in his or her field of interest as governed by theorised regularities, thus revealing some aspect of an underlying reality which can be expected to manifest itself in an indeterminate range of future phenomena. This process of explanation must start from a sensed pattern lurking within or behind the data, a starting point differing only in the recorded explicitness of these data from the unclarified intuition with which ordinary verbal self-expression begins. As Michael Polanyi, both a research scientist and a philosopher, described it:

Discovery comes in stages, and at the beginning the scientist has but a vague and subtle intimation of its prospects. Yet these anticipations ... are the precious gifts of his originality. They contain a deepened sense of the nature of things and an awareness of the facts that might serve as clues to a suspected coherence in nature. (Polyani 1969: 143)

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But the 'clues' in question are not of the kind that offer an elementary ('my dear Watson') deductive route to a putative conclusion. The murderer must have been over six feet tall, because only so could he have reached down from above the fireplace the Japanese ceremonial sword with which the deed was done; here the height of the sword's mounting is already given its status as a clue by the independent fact of the victim's lying there transfixed with the weapon, and the particular deduction follows (on the balance of probabilities, absent contraindications like a chair by the fireplace with a muddy footprint on it, and so forth). But the clues to a suspected coherence which the scientific data provide only become clues *in the light of* that suspicion, which is itself a suspected coherence of the data *read as clues*. Also essential to the process is the improbability of these particular observed occurrences' having arisen merely by chance, but it is the scientist's (trained and informed) judgement which must put a notional value on that improbability and must decide when that value is high enough for explicable coherence to be in the offing – and these judgements are no more than the sensed coherence manifesting itself under another aspect (Polanyi 1969: 107–08). And it ought now to be clear that we should call this coherence 'provisionally *created*' rather than sensed. (A whole cannot be first met with as a conjunction of parts, because it can only be of a whole already in some sense met with that the parts can be met with *as* parts – but equally, it is only in terms of the coherence of parts that anything can be a whole.) Similarly, it is the intuition of a coherence from clues supplied by the data which guides the recognition as clues of the data from which it is intuited, and this is the process of creation that we should by now be ready to recognise. It is the scientist's creative intuition too (his or her 'originality' in Polanyi's terms), which configures these radically non-causal relations as an incentive to the construction of hypotheses, a process also relying on clues or prompts provided by relevant training and experience.

The testing of hypotheses once constructed looks straightforwardly deductive: the hypothesis predicts event E at time t , and if E does not occur at t then the hypothesis must be wrong, and it is back to the drawing board thanks to the rule logicians call *modus tollens* (If p then q , but it turns out that q is not the case, so nor can p be the case.) Even here, of course, judgement is called for. (Is the hypothesis strong enough to support the possibility that E 's non-occurrence was a freak result, or down to some hidden flaw in the apparatus? How many predicted E s must fail to occur before we are forced to reject that sort of explanation?) But supposing one's first hypothesis has been convincingly falsified, what then? The

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status of the phenomena as clues will have been subtly altered, as correspondingly will have been the sensed coherence which the hypothesis expressed – the sense of it will have been sharpened by the very specificities of its predictive failure – but the exploration going forward will remain as intuitively heuristic-creative as it was from the outset, until an account is achieved which can (for the moment) stand up to testing. Throughout it, the scientist will have been guided towards expressing a discovered coherence in lawlike form, by observational clues which only acquire guiding force as transformed by that coherence into law-governed behaviour: the pattern to which they jointly point must both emerge from them and draw them together into the source of emergence. Here again we have the essential creative process subverting ordinary logic.

Deep beneath all these considerations about expression lies the radical creativity of our life-in-meaning, which can best be appreciated in small compass by reflecting on one's relation to one's own native language. That way of putting it already makes it sound as if there exist, unproblematically, two terms to this relation, the language-user or users and the language. But this is hopeless. The language (English, say) *has* no existence apart from its use in communication between its users. It does not reside in standard dictionaries and grammars, nor in any linguist's *corpus*, nor in some unimaginable anthology of all the sentences ever spoken or written in it, nor in an equally unimaginable concourse of its past and present speakers. It can only ever be said to be *there* in the criss-cross of the constant and innumerable actual exchanges between English speakers, or in a reader's actual construal of some text in English. And yet none of these transactions, in which alone the language exists, could occur *unless* the language existed. Native speakers of English can communicate in it because they have been born into, and brought up to have their being and conduct their thinking in, a medium which is to be *found* nowhere except in the fact that they and many millions of others engage in these activities, but the irrefutable reality of which is presupposed by the very possibility of anyone's doing so. This is a situation so fundamental to human being that ordinarily we never think about it, and yet so inexplicable in terms of clear-cut relations between objective existents that when we do think about it, a chasm miles deep seems to open beneath our feet.

There is no prospect of understanding what is going on here except by an appeal to the idea of creativity. The language in which we make sense of all our experience and pursue all our interactions, in which we conduct and express all our thinking from ordinary ideas through scientific hypotheses and world-pictures

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to highly elaborate constructions of literature and philosophy, must exist by being under constant collaborative *re-creation*, in and through all those communicative activities which its presence as a received living heritage has informed and made possible. If we must identify an agent of this collaborative creativity in respect of any particular language, it can only be the culture of the relevant community or communities, constantly transmitted in the ongoing formation of its innumerable individual bearers. But this process itself is quite unintelligible without language as its core and dynamic, so finally we can get no deeper here than creativity as a fundamental force of the life itself which, in human beings, language as the essential medium of reflexive consciousness enables and serves. Nor do we need to get any deeper, if we remain undaunted by what logic 'rules out', and acknowledge such creative force as something simply *given*.

Creativity and agency

We left hanging, when discussing free action in Chapter 7, the question of how, if we are free to choose on the basis of reasons for action, we actually do so. For it can seem that if anything motivational *makes* me choose A rather than B, then I am not free, whereas if nothing makes me, I am not really choosing but opting at random – as if all my free choices came down to coin-tossings. Nor is it any use here to say that I choose not randomly but for a reason, because if the reason – *as* a reason, rather than a force – is prompting but not compelling me, I must choose to implement it, to act on this reason rather than that or rather than not acting at all, and for that choice just the same dilemma seems to recur: it must be caused or random, neither of which seems compatible with acting for a reason.

Here we meet a very deep prejudice, the origins of which lie in the nature of reflexive consciousness itself, and from which it requires a strong sense of human creativity, as we have been exemplifying it, in order to escape. This is the prejudice that the principle of sufficient reason, which seems to underpin all our thinking, must be taken only in the particular sense which leads to that dilemma. The principle is that nothing exists or happens without a sufficient reason for its being or occurring in the way it does, rather than otherwise. This rule – effectively that everything which can become an object for us comes with a *why?* to which there must be an answer (even if we do not or even cannot know that answer) – can be shown to arise as a direct expression of our specific form of consciousness. But we have a very strong tendency to interpret it as laying down that no event E can happen unless there is in E's present circumstances a sufficient explanation out of relevant

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past facts for E's happening: that is, that nothing except what is *already explicable* can happen. This is the interpretation which leads us to feel that if my choice on any occasion of option-selection is not simply a coin-toss (and so not a choice), it must have a sufficient explanation in terms of facts about my past experience and development, the multifaceted somatic, emotional and neuronal history that has constituted me as I now am. And these facts *being* past, and so unchangeable, it follows that what they now sufficiently explain must also already be unchangeable. That is the thesis of determinism, but in a different form from that in which we have previously considered it, as the supposedly exclusive reality of the objectual realm. It is deeply mistaken, but we need to go equally deep to understand how.

The principle of sufficient reason emerges from and expresses our reflexive form of consciousness. First-order awareness of an existent thing or event has for its object that thing or event, but reflexive consciousness – awareness of my awareness – has for its object my *representation* of the thing or event in question. It is this step back from direct awareness which introduces into the world the *possibility of being otherwise*, which in an unrepresented world could have no place (everything in such a world being simply and as it were stolidly just exactly as it is). My representation and its object, however, recognised as distinct, are thereby recognised as potentially divergent even while they are taken to coincide – either might have been different while the other did not vary. (Since I represent, I could *misrepresent* on either ground.) We are thus aware of things and events against this perpetual background of possible otherwise-ness, which is to say that we always encounter them as asking in themselves the standing question *why* they are as they are and *not* otherwise.

As a condition of that same reflexive form of experience, however (as outlined in Chapter 7), we encounter these things as existing, and the events constituted by changes in them as transpiring, independently of our consciousness in an objective realm. So considered, they can bring with them an answer to that standing question only out of their objective histories. An objective world's objectivity consists only in its present and past conditions, and an appeal to present conditions alone could have no explanatory force. 'Why is he transfixed with the ceremonial sword?' is not to be answered by 'Because it is sticking right through him' – we need, for a sufficient reason, an explanation of how this condition *came about*. (And 'Why is the grass wet?' is only sufficiently answered by 'Because it's raining' because that *because* draws on repeated, and thus past, observations of this frequent conjunction.) Present conditions can only explain present states or events in the light of

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some relevant past. The idea that no state or event, objectively considered, can come about without there being some sufficient explanation for its doing so in past and therefore unalterably determining facts, falls out readily from these deep features of our reflexive form of experience.

Determinism, as we have noted, arises from our taking our actions, too, exclusively as events in this sense. But this is the crucial misstep, although we need to be attuned to human creativity to recognise it as such. The motivations to action of a reflexively consciousness being are, as we have seen, *reasons*, each operating within a nexus of rational implications ('If I do A, then it will follow that... while doing B means...' and so on), so that my decision between them can always be rationally grounded – but it remains a decision *I must make* rationally, not one which my reasons have made for me. Actions are not events in an objectivised world at which the agent has as it were an especially privileged ringside seat, a kind of peculiarly intimate involvement like that of the person who lends a watch to the conjuror, only more so. We do not know our actions simply through observation, but as ongoing manifestations of our non-observational self-knowledge, and this is because action consists in the agent's *making him- or herself up as he or she goes along* – an always essentially improvisatory creative self-constitution in which the relation of present and past is radically different from that governing any event considered purely objectively. This being so, the sufficient reason for my acting as I do and not otherwise is very often just that *I will* so to act, on the clues of a personal history, certainly, but one which my every action going forward reconfigures, contra-causally, as the past of that particular act – in the creative way that we should now be disposed to recognise. (The closest analogy from among the examples we have considered is perhaps that of the emerging melody reconfiguring the pattern of its development.)

So have we now answered the question, carried forward from Chapter 7 and reprised at the outset of this section, of *how* we actually make a free choice? Someone might contend that we have not, insofar as 'We just do!' is no kind of answer, and that is all the foregoing really amounts to. For to say that I can act freely, undetermined by my past, because each free action consists in reconstituting my past as that of the agent as whom it ongoingly realises me, could seem no more than an offer to explain a straightforward impossibility by a more elaborate one, and thus to be no better than mere reassertion of the explanandum.

Here, however, we must recur to the methodological point made at the beginning of this chapter. We cannot *prove* that an agent can reconfigure his or

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her history contra-causally as the antecedent conditions of this present act, because the logic appealed to in any explicit proof simply rules out that kind of relation between past and present. But we can *demonstrate* this fundamental feature of action: that is, we can point to it, as I have done, in the context of a sequence of reminders of how the experience of creativity invoked here, in the ongoing bringing of oneself forth in action, actually pervades our lives. And once we recognise that this is the only kind of demonstration relevantly possible, we should be able to reconcile ourselves to not demanding an inappropriate (and therefore, in fact, un-rigorous) rigour of proof.

The resolute sceptic might then come back with the question: how *can* what you call 'creativity' pervade the life of a creature which, for all our human exceptionalism, has that life as part of the objective world where the principle of sufficient reason rules? We shall not change our method of demonstration in response to this challenge, but we shall need to widen its scope, and this I do in the next chapter.

❧ Chapter 10 ❧

The Creativity of Life

We can move to the last and deepest dimension of creativity, which I shall consider by noting that creative action is not the prerogative of human beings alone – because action which is in the crucial sense *freely* creative is not such a prerogative, despite a regrettable but longstanding philosophical tradition of overlooking or denying this. What distinguishes humans from other conscious creatures is really not so much freedom as consciousness of its exercise within the logical space of reasons. Any sufficiently conscious living creature implements its promptings freely, not just in the compatibilist sense that often nothing is stopping it, but in the full sense that its acting is undetermined by its promptings. Watch any time-wasting cat video on YouTube, and unless your vision is clouded with philosophical prejudice, what you will be observing is the behaviour of something which is deciding from moment to moment *what to do* with its promptings, despite neither being reflexively conscious of itself as so deciding, nor taking its promptings as reasons – something which is behaving radically differently from any kind of corporeal machinery moving under mere stimulus or impulsion.

Non-rational agency

Suppose, for example, that a cat is stalking a bird but, to complete the process and pounce, it has to cross an open space where it could be noticed by the dog which it remembers to frequent the garden. It has come to the point at which it can either proceed to pounce or abandon the stalk, and its sense of now being at that point is just what its ‘having options’ consists in. It does not consciously consult or compare and evaluate these options, it simply decides one way or the other, either for ‘letting I dare not wait upon I would’, or for pouncing. But how does it do *that*? In particular, how, since it does not make a considered judgement and act on it, does it implement one or other of its options without being caused to do so? What, we are inclined to ask, is the mechanism of implementation here? But if there were a mechanism, the cat would be a little furry automaton and, as just noted, it is evident to the unprepossessed eye that living things are not automata. And indeed there *is* no mechanism – rationality (acting on a judgement), causation

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(responding mechanically to a force) and randomness are not the only alternatives. The cat *invents* its way forward, without either deliberating or being caused to act; it creates its action, and simultaneously creates itself as the agent of this or that act.

But how do we then explain *which* option it adopts? The crucial point to recognise here is that we have just done so. The powerful temptation to say that the cat must either be more nervous of the dog than it is hungry for the bird, or vice-versa, to say ‘Surely it must act on its stronger prompting’, illegitimately turns a tautology into a mechanism. For to say that it realises one or the other prompting as the one on which it acts is not to say that it recognises, but that it *constitutes*, one or the other as the stronger. The cat *prefers* A to B, in the sense of that verb meaning not that it finds itself with a preference working it through its causal history, but that it actively promotes one or the other alternative from the status of option to that of action. To say that it prefers A to B states what it *does*, not how it stands – its preferring does not pre-exist its decision and control it, but is constituted by its acting on the clues of its habituation, recollections and present inclinations as organised by its feline nature, to seize on one prompting for implementation instead of the other. And in this it works creatively in its largely instinctual domain of action, just as we do in our largely rational one.

Some may still feel that we lack an answer to *why* it constitutes one option or other as that on which it acts, because they are inclined to feel that ‘it creates itself forward, in a manifestation of life’s spontaneous originality, from moment to moment’ *cannot* be such an answer. But why not? The previous chapter will have failed of its purpose if the inclination to find that proposition meaningless, or some kind of mystery-mongering, has not by this point been significantly weakened. The cat prefers one thing to the other, and we have failed to grasp what that involves if we still think that, unless the creature deliberates or is causally moved, its action is inexplicable. Creative initiation of this order – expression in this and so much similar animal behaviour of life’s inherent power to realise itself onward in uncaused action – is wholly occluded in the two-dimensional perspective of flat naturalism, where we see only a world of objects in causal relations on the one hand, and on the other hand action regarded as deliberately rational and so exclusively human. But in the three-dimensional view of deep naturalism, life’s fundamental creativity in action is inescapable.

Nor, as such, are its manifestations confined to animals. Consider a tree, bringing forth its leaves in Spring (as we significantly put it, rather than saying for example only that the rising sap and the rise in ambient temperature are triggering

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their emergence). These leaves will have a particular configuration: just so many of them, so many slight variations in shape, so many larger and smaller, such-and-such a patterning on the branches... Are we to suppose that configuration to have its full and sufficient explanation in some particular conjunction of the relevant causally-considered factors? Must the sap have risen with just such force, at just such points in the graph of daily temperatures, the winds and rains have coincided in just such combinations, as to have resulted in *that particular* output and distribution of leaves rather than another? This is not of course the question whether we could ever trace all the channels through which causality might be supposed to run in such a case, nor indeed whether we could even specify any such output with the precision necessary to begin doing so – plainly, in the case of a full-grown tree, that looks like an impossible challenge. It is instead the question whether we are bound to recognise here, independently of our inability to specify it in detail, an implacably causal process. For if we are, we are surely also bound by the same token to say that *every leaf's* relation to all the rest has its origin in some exact set of preceding conditions – indeed, that some such set must be responsible for there being (in reality, as Rescher would put it) a total of precisely n leaves, rather than $n+1$. But this would surely be to tell an intuitively quite implausible just-so story. It would represent entrapment in a kind of explanation which only pretends to derive the outcome from prior conditions, while in fact it mythologises back to supposed determining conditions from the outcome.

Once we have noticed that implausibility, moreover, there is no mitigating it with constructions like 'caused but with a margin of randomness' – so that the given prior conditions can be understood as resulting in $n \pm 20$ leaves, for example. For why should the margin be just *so* wide? Either some specific causal conjunction must explain the number 20 here, reintroducing the difficulty we were seeking to mitigate, or that figure must in turn be subject to a margin of randomness, which clearly yields a vicious regress and tacitly gives up on causation while affecting not to.

The obvious alternative to the causal just-so story lies in the same kind of appeal to something like agency as was called for in the cat's case. It is to say: just this configuration of leaves is what the tree has *made of its affordances* this year. This is what it has brought forth, on the template of its arboreal nature, out of the given fall of rain, incidence of sunlight and so on. It could have produced rather more or rather fewer leaves, rather differently distributed, but what it did produce is explained not as already given and explicable by those conditions but by what it actively put forth in response to their prompting. And it did so not, clearly, as

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a matter of ‘free choice’, as the cat had between sensed options, but of what we might call free realisation, within a range of options naturally limited, as of course were the cat’s (which couldn’t prefer *flying* to pouncing) and as indeed are those for any genuine human choice under given circumstances.

Life and life-forms

But how can anything *at all* like agency be attributed to a rooted, non-conscious thing like a tree – apparently lacking any functioning analogous to sensation or intention? Here I neglect various comparatively recent writings (such as Wohlleben 2017; Simard 2021) which have claimed that trees communicate with one another through mycorrhizal networks under the soil (the so-called ‘wood-wide web’) and perhaps even provide support and assistance to one another through those connections. This is empirical material and, even were the claims fully established, might as such remain a candidate for causal explanation. What I am pointing to, however, is something radically non-causal. The tree brings forth its leaves annually, as it unfurls its whole living self ongoingly, on the template for itself constituted by its nature as embodied in itself: it realises or *enacts* itself from beginning to end of its life on the clue or ‘script’ of its own essential being. This cannot be a causal process because, as we have already noted, the idea of something *bringing itself forth*, if read causally, implies its preceding itself as cause and ensuing on itself as effect, which is impossible. Rather, we must recognise the process as fundamentally originaive or creative. As such, it is profoundly characteristic of *life*, the idea of which is actually contained in that of something (the organism) acting out its own form of being.

Here the concept of a *life-form* is crucial. Propositions expressing what Michael Thompson (1995) calls natural-historical judgements about how forms of life behave, such as (for a random example) ‘Male [hazel] catkins form before the leaves fall in autumn, but they remain dormant until February or March when the female catkins open’ (Bennett and Bennett 2022), have particular logical characteristics. They are not universal quantifications, because they cannot be falsified by finding a few hazels where the male catkins have not opened until April, as ‘All male hazel catkins remain dormant...’ would be. Nor are they statistical generalisations like ‘The average British family has 1.7 children’, arrived at by mathematical operations on census or survey results; they tell us what is *in the nature* of hazels, as the statistical statement does not tell us about the nature of the British family, only about its current contingencies. And if we were to say instead ‘Male hazel catkins *typically* open...’, this would not be like saying what typified the British family, because it

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embodies a *standard*: hazels whose catkins have failed to open by then are *deficient*, as the untypical family is not – or not necessarily. Correspondingly, we can say how high the Ash or the Oak typically grow in given conditions (how high it is in their nature to grow in those conditions), while we cannot meaningfully ask exactly how high ‘the Ash’ *is*, but only what height some particular specimen has reached. Propositions about the Ash, Oak or Hazel are made true not by particular ashes, oaks and hazels, nor by the totality of specimens either quantified over or averaged, but by something indefeasibly real which the individual specimens instantiate (more or less satisfactorily according as they are more or less flourishing), and yet which is only realised *in* those instantiations. It is this *sui generis* relation between particulars and universals, between living things and their given life-forms, which uniquely characterises life – because it is what enables us to say that the *being* of any individual organism is also its *way of being*, something which it can intelligibly be said to pursue, to be guided by and more or less fully to realise. (The relation is *sui generis* insofar as the classic ‘problem of universals’ discussed in Chapter 8, as to whether and how universals like *redness* exist apart from the red things of which they are predicated, does not address it. Contrast with any *life-form* the form of *corrosion*, for example, which is only ever instantiated in rusty things and about which general truths, such as those concerning its links with dampness and oxygen, can certainly be stated, but which we have no inclination to say that rusty things are *enacting*, or are guided by in their instantiation of it, any more than we should describe something just a bit rusty as not corroding properly.)

Actively pursuing the project of realisation set by what only subsists as realised is thus the fundamental distinguishing principle of life. But it is also as near as one can come to expressing what is fundamental to creativity itself in all the various manifestations we have considered. The creativity of conscious agency is the capacity of conscious creatures to invent or improvise themselves forward on the clue of their immediate promptings and habits, and on the template of dispositions going with their nature, in dealing with their behavioural options. In the reflexively conscious life of human beings, this agential creativity is the basis of our experience of rational freedom, or uncaused self-invention in response to normative motivation. The creativity of expression is the capacity of human beings, as concept users, to bring forth, or unfurl themselves in, conceptual life – ideas, theories and other formulations collaboratively constructed in language, which is itself created and inhabited as a common sense made and constantly invented forward through the transpersonal life, the specifically human experience articu-

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lated in meanings necessarily shared, which it empowers and in which it has its only existence. And the creativity of art is the celebratory exercise of this capacity for expression in particular symbolic modes which afford us delight by focusing our senses and intelligence, with a peculiar force and purity of attention, on the aspects of reality which they bring forth.

So, finally, that which, through all these varieties of being, defies the apparently self-evident logical truth that nothing can shape out its own coming to pass looks as if it has to be recognised as the creatively originative thrust or *nisus* of life itself.

But life, surely, is an empirical phenomenon. It is something which, however it emerged on the primeval Earth, *did* at some point emerge – because it was certainly not present in the planet’s original, purely gaseous and then mineral existence as spun off from the Sun. And that emergence must have involved some kind of regular association of molecules, either within the early seas or under some other physico-chemical conditions, leading through blind stages protracted over many millennia to the constitution of self-replicating cells, on which the developmental force of evolution by natural selection could then work to yield, over still further millennia, the almost incredible variety and proliferation of life-forms we observe today. This received scientific wisdom envisages a process that evidently began on a purely causal basis, and thus must have remained so throughout, however untraceably complex the lineaments of determination – for a non-causal process *cannot* ‘emerge from’ a causal one. (Consider the point at which it might have done so; either what happened at that point was caused, so that nothing non-causal had yet emerged, or it was not, in which case something non-causal must already have emerged; that is, no such point of emergence is thinkable.) There is no place in any of this for an originative creative *nisus* – or, if we do deploy such terminology, it could only be as a gesture towards what we cannot yet express in fully causal terms, but know must be apt in principle to such explanation. (The echo of McGinn’s ‘flat naturalism’ will be heard, and quite correctly, in these formulations.) Originative creativity, that is, would have to be *primordial*, for, by just the same argument, it could not have arisen within a fully causal world – it must always be either too soon or too late for anything to be *started on* freely inventing itself onwards. But these evolutionary considerations seem to emphasise how life is precisely *not* primordial but derivative from earlier natural conditions. Or, as the cosmologist Paul Davies puts it with latter-day Cartesian robustness (and, as regards living things, in defiance of the evidence of our eyes as already noted), ‘Today we know that there is

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no life force. Living organisms are machines, and they derive their extraordinary qualities from their great complexity.’ (Davies 2007: 253)

The (literally) vital point to make in response to this is that *life* is a uniquely complex concept. While it has a strong empirical component, giving us the sense in which we identify living things in their various forms – as metabolising, reproductive, subject to growth and decay and so forth – the component on which we draw to *understand* these processes is actually *a priori*. Life in this sense is a concept which we bring to our empirical encounters with the biological, not one we draw from them. (Thompson 1995 makes this point particularly clearly.) Observation can provide us with knowledge of tigers, for example, as a species (it can enable us to distinguish them from leopards and lions, say), and it can supply inductive generalisations about how they characteristically behave; but it will not provide us with the knowledge that in so behaving they are enacting their tiger-hood, improving it from moment to moment on the pattern or template of their species nature and in response to their opportunities. That conception we cannot help carrying over from our grasp of life-process *from within* and, in that sense, it, with its creative corollaries, genuinely *is* primordial. In essentially the way that other *a priori* categories like time, space, causality and objectuality operate, it anticipates and structures our experience rather than being based on it.

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How do we grasp life thus from within, as a process of creative bringing-forth? Here once again the root of the matter lies in reflexive consciousness. The idea of something’s *bringing itself forth* defies causal logic, since it seems to involve its preceding itself; but trans-logically, it is the idea that its being, at any moment, is a stage on its way of actively realising or enacting the kind of thing it is. This requires us to be able to make sense of something’s being distinct, not just from its changing circumstances but from changes in itself. My coffee mug is distinct from its changing circumstances: it persists through being cold on the shelf, warm when full of coffee and soapy while being washed up. But we do not think that it is actively maintaining itself through all these phases, nor that it develops or extends its way of being a mug in their succession. Only what can be said to *adopt* sequential instantiations of itself can be said actively to change or maintain itself, as living things by contrast do, and it is only in reflexive consciousness – consciousness of the self *as* conscious of its contingencies – that we are given intuitively the possibility of something’s being thus distinct from its instantiations. Reflexive

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consciousness is conscious of itself as subjectivity (for-itself-ness) only insofar as it is conscious of what is *not* itself, that is, of its changing states of sensory affectedness taken as representative of objects existing over against itself. (Pure consciousness of subjectivity, content-less awareness only of awareness, is as impossible as having a perspective on nothing.) This radical duality within our experience is what gives a human being the irresistible sense of being a *person*, something which (in Locke's classic formulation) 'can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places' (Locke 1690/1959: I, 448). But in so doing, it also gives us the general form of an active centre of being realising itself in and through its own activity. And this is precisely the *a priori* understanding of life as creative which we bring to structure our empirical encounters with whatever we find moving or responding or growing – that is, fluidly changing in ways which seem, equally irresistibly, to arise from within the creature or organism itself. The idea of a nature or form of life which the individual living centre ongoingly enacts or realises in 'different times and places' is then just the exponent for unthinking or non-thinking things of that *being as way of being* which we intuit in ourselves as the form of persisting conscious personhood inventing forward its own existence through time.

It is the *a priori* of this conception of what is essential to life that explains why all empirically-based accounts of the phenomenon not only are but must be inadequate – or rather, why they only ever approach adequacy by tacitly adopting or assuming the *a priori* understanding of what they describe. A classic case of this is the explanation of living structures in terms of genetic programming. Always in such explanatory offers one finds a move of which this, from Richard Dawkins, is only a revealingly crude instance:

Should we then call the original replicator molecules 'living'? Who cares?
Whether we call the early replicators living or not, they were the ancestors of life; they were our founding fathers. (Dawkins 1976: 18)

Dawkins himself evidently does care, since he embeds the presumption that they *were* living in his ascription to them of founding *fatherhood*, which is a relation which only something living can bear to anything. But what he has previously illustrated as 'replication' is the entirely automatic chemical attachment of molecules to similar molecules within molecular chains to produce duplicated such chains – these then sometimes breaking up to yield separately existing replicas of the original patterns, subject however to occasional random variation on which natural selection operates through 'competition' for any remaining free molecules within

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the 'primeval soup' of the early seas. This overwhelmingly causal process (apart from the random variation) in due course produces cells whose self-replication is governed by the varying arrangements of DNA within them and which, thus, we are told, have been launched on the route to full organic life:

The coded message of the DNA, written in the four-letter nucleotide alphabet, is translated in a simple mechanical way into ... the alphabet of amino acids which spells out protein molecules ... Proteins ... exert sensitive control over all the chemical processes inside the cell, selectively turning them on and off at precise times and in precise places. Exactly how this eventually leads to the development of a baby is a story which it will take decades, perhaps centuries, for embryologists to work out. But it is a fact that it does. (Dawkins 1976: 23)

Here again, however, we have an only slightly subtler version of the smuggling of a presumption of living activity ('sensitive control ... selectively ...') into later phases of a process which starts as avowedly mechanical. The labours of embryologists, however dedicated, will never demonstrate such activity to emerge from a causal process, since this is impossible (to repeat, at any moment immediately after one at which self-realising activity is *caused* to start, it will not yet have started), and it only seems plausible that the demonstration will be achieved during these conveniently future centuries because at this stage of the play with metaphor, our *a priori* understanding of life as creative has cut in.

Again, the now-standard description of the genetic material as providing 'instructions' for the ontogenesis of living creatures can only make sense in the same kind of way. Chemical signals instruct cell-buildup just as electronic signals instruct my mobile phone to display a certain configuration of characters, but when the text-message thus constituted instructs me to make a doctor's appointment, we have passed from a sense of the term embedded in causal sequence to one wholly dependent on the living activity of interpretation – just as dependent, in fact, as are all those 'recipes for building bodies' which neo-Darwinian biologists claim to be contained in the genes.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on this latter comparison, because it appears to have been given a considerable load-bearing role in supporting the idea that particular genetic arrangements are what *really* (scientifically understood) constitute what I have been referring to as 'life-forms' – which cannot, therefore, have the trans-logical characteristic invoked in the previous section, that of guiding the ongoing realisation of living things while themselves only existing, or subsisting, in their instantiations as thus realised. Rather, science has revealed to us (it

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is intimated) that such ‘guidance’ is encoded in what are ultimately patterns of biochemical elements, identifiably existing in every cell of each living organism, and thus pre-existing whatever they combine to shape in ontogenesis. This encoding is pictured as having a status analogous to

a recipe in a cookery book ... a set of instructions which, if obeyed in the right order, will result in a cake ... Embryonic development ... is an orderly sequence of events, like the procedure for making a cake, except that there are millions more steps in the process and different steps are going on simultaneously in many different parts of the ‘dish’ ... Precisely which genes are switched on in any one cell at any time depends on chemical conditions in that cell. That, in turn, depends on past conditions in that part of the embryo. (Dawkins 1988: 295, 296)

To be fair, he does say at one point that the genes are ‘much *more like* a recipe than like a blueprint’ (p. 296, my emphasis), but any hesitation which this might imply about riding the simile hard is immediately forgotten, as the passage quoted above amply demonstrates. So we are presented with a ‘recipe’ which not only (quite *unlike* anything to be found in any cookery book) both reads and follows itself, but also apparently – see the last two sentences of the passage – *causes itself* to do so. And while not being a blueprint (there being no one-to-one mapping, as Dawkins insists, between elements in the ‘instructions’ and in the ‘cake’), it is nevertheless everywhere, cell by cell, embodied in what it causes itself to instruct itself to produce.

The point here ought to be clear enough. This picture (if that is the word) of the genetic template as at once instruction manual for and implementing agent of a set of processes from which it is also not itself distinct, does not *explain* the idea of a life-form creatively realising itself in particular instantiations – instead, it is only our already possessing that idea which gives any graspable sense to the ‘recipe’ model (enough *ad hoc* sense, presumably, to organise empirical research and structure its findings). Quite generally, biologists’ characterisation of organisms as *autopoietic*, capable of producing and maintaining themselves (Maturana and Varela 1980) is not a respectably scientific advance on or replacement for vague intuitions towards which we once gestured with terms like *life-form*, *telic* and *creative*: rather, it is an attribution which we only understand through our *a priori* grasp of the fundamental principle of life which such terms express.

Or again: McGilchrist’s picture (glanced at in Chapters 2 and 7) of how we understand the world through modelling and interpretation modularised as

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interaction between the brain's hemispheres, must be recognised as *itself a model*, and so unable to help us to the kind of creatively-synthesising understanding which we must already have in order to deploy it, except by evoking that understanding for more attentive contemplation. Here is further demonstrated, in the context of a scientific account by comparison with whose polymathic range and cultured subtlety the crudities of Dawkins are very apparent, how the attempt to rationalise life's fundamental creativity in terms of something *else* has always to fall back on our intuitive awareness and acknowledgement of, and practical familiarity with, the creative life-principle.

That principle we might capture, in a phrase, as *active becoming*. The *a priori* idea of life-form brings together and subtly interweaves elements which go essentially to understanding what this involves. In the first place, there is the field of life-possibilities which its life-form marks out for an organism, and which we can empirically associate with the genetic configuration: a rabbit invents itself forward through its rabbit-hood, but never as anything other than 'the Rabbit'. (Of course, life configuring itself in relation to its affordances – the process empirically describable as evolutionary – can change and develop 'the X' itself for any *x*.) Not to be sharply distinguished from this field of being, there are the individual organism's dealings with its contingent opportunities – the life-form here serving as clue which the directedness of organic becoming is always following. (Anything which is *becoming* has always to become *something*, and as it were to become-from something previous – its processive continuity and particular ongoing self-realisation tracing its unique pathway through its field of available possibility, the constant producing of itself out of itself and its opportunities which it is life's essence to be.) But also, and without which none of this talk of 'formedness' makes sense, we must recognise the organism's active *performing* of its own being-as-becoming. This is the fundamental difference between, say, the plant's becoming larger and the sky's becoming darker – without appreciating which we have no understanding of living things, and which no appeal to the 'great complexity' of the organic can hope to reach. Each ash-tree, each rabbit, just as each person, *acts* its respective formation. Each day's rabbiting-around, each year's version of the foliage, each individual's free self-invention from occasion to occasion, will differ as each night's performance by an actor differs slightly as he or she creates and recreates the character which is only 'in' the script as far as it is to be realised on the stage. Organisms at all levels are the agents of their own becoming – and this is finally what we mean by the creativity inherent in life itself.

*Vindicating deep naturalism?***Vindicating deep naturalism?**

We started our consideration of creativity in Chapter 9 by canvassing a radical difficulty for deep naturalism. According to Story 2, we have to encounter the human lifeworld, the world of objects and values with which our reflexively conscious form of experience necessarily presents us, as *reality*, the ground where all discovery and explanation must come to rest. But a really existing natural world must contain the materials and forces which we have discovered to precede and explain life in all its varieties, including the human – and so it cannot be understood as ultimately the expression of any ‘form of experience’ which life may take. Life cannot be an emergent feature *within* a ‘lifeworld’; what depends on life, while it could be our species-specific way of *taking* the world, as on Story 1, could not *be* the real natural world on which life depends.

It should now be apparent, however, that the grip this difficulty exerts depends on our understanding life as an exclusively empirical matter – as the object, first of flat-naturalist observation, and later of biological and evolutionary science, addressed to the material world in which we find ourselves and to its extensive range of living things. But once we grasp, from within, the creativity of the life-process as an *a priori* intuition, that grip begins to loosen. Indeed, we start to glimpse how, far from defying explanation as the human lifeworld, the world of nature can only really be made intelligible in those terms.

At the heart of the creative is the contra-causal idea of *activity as initiation* – of something acting freely to bring something forth, to make something happen without having been made to make it happen. Here change and development are crucially explicable in terms of what activity pursues, the future it seeks to realise, and not determinatively in terms of what drives it from out of the past. This, as we have already noted, is a fundamentally different concept from that of an *event*, an occurrence of change among objects comprising an objective world, which just as such can only be explained causally – that is, by reference to preceding events. But now, if the world of nature is considered as in itself essentially a series of events – if, in other words, we treat activity wherever it occurs, in humans, cats or trees, as finally reducible to caused events – the world under that aspect ceases to make sense.

This collapse of intelligibility is what Kant long ago adduced as his first Antinomy of Pure Reason (Kant 1787/1933: 396–402). If events have to be caused by previous events, that is, if for anything to happen something must *already* have happened, the universe or natural world as a whole evidently can have no beginning in a first event. Hence it must have existed for a period of time stretching back to

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infinity from this present moment. But this means that an infinite number of events must have elapsed before the most recent one, whatever it was, was reached, and this is impossible – no infinity of anything can ‘have elapsed’, any more than you could watch a train with an infinite number of carriages disappear into a tunnel. It is no good protesting, as Strawson (1966: 176) did with regard to this argument, that it is invalid because, while a series of events certainly could not *start* and then go on for ever up until the present, it seems that it could perfectly well get to the present having gone on for ever. It is just in this last apparent possibility, however, that the core of the difficulty resides. For suppose infinite time to have preceded some dated event, say occurring in the year 2000; then what has preceded the event of my writing this sentence must be infinite time *plus twenty-four years*. But this is nonsense – the operation of addition becomes meaningless when one of its terms is infinity, since its result is always and only infinity. Something equivalent could, however, be said of any two dated events; so the idea of an infinite (that is, beginning-less) succession of dated events leading up to the present, implying nonsense, is itself nonsensical. But equally so, of course, must be that of there having been a *first* event, since we would then have to imagine it as happening *ex nihilo*, and how should we do that for something that *happens*? (Its unimaginability is only thinly disguised, not removed, if we call the first event a Big Bang¹ and try to think back to it through the series of subsequent events in astrophysical rather than metaphysical terms.)

Thus a universe or whole natural world comprising merely a series of events stretching through quantised time cannot be coherently thought. It is only when we think of that world as brought forth or realised ongoingly by *activity*, recognised as a fundamental principle of initiation, that we can make sense of its existence in time. For activity, precisely *as* initiation, does not depend on previous activity as events do on previous events, and so the difficulty with its first occasion does not arise – or as one might say, it is solved afresh on each occasion. Only a world the modelling of which as a sequence of events is finally an expression of originative activity is thus finally intelligible to us. And we can only think of the world in that light (now that religious myths of a world-framing Creator have largely lapsed) by understanding it as the lifeworld constituted by the creative activity of human beings. That understanding, in turn, is a matter of our taking the frame of nature to be life-formed as the immediate self-realisation of reflexive consciousness, articulated

1. Why *Big*? – what comparative bangs were then around? Why not a Medium-Sized Pop? The absurdity of the question points up that of the conception as any kind of *explanation*.

Vindicating deep naturalism?

by concept-using social creatures into a shared external world. Our finding the world habitably intelligible, in other words, as a reality with a natural history to which all empirical life does indeed belong, depends on our *starting from life* – the life given us from within, *a priori*, as indefeasibly creative activity.

This is to vindicate the deep-naturalist account, which (with Story 2) starts from human life in just that way. But, as I began the chapter by noting, that vindication depends entirely on our acceptance of the creative principle of life's bringing itself into being. That principle defies the ordinary logic of occurrence, thought of as a sequence of changes to existents in quantified time, and so it cannot be proven by argument which only proceeds by accepting the laws of that logic (in particular, that nothing can both exist and not yet exist at any given moment). Beyond that, indeed, proof is strictly irrelevant in this whole context. For just as all proof by argument depends on accepting the laws of logic, which because they cannot be disproven by such argument cannot be proven by it either, so one cannot justify our reliance on the principle of creativity because all justification, all understanding of anything in terms of other things which we understand, depends on interpretation or sense-making which is itself a creative process. Sense-making is *activity* as we have described this in distinction from mere events, or else it is nothing; it is an active shaping of meaning, not a registration of something already there. My dictaphone registers my words but my interlocutor makes sense of them, and the difference lies in the living activity of interpretation. Sense-making is radically counter-causal: if what comes out of my mouth or my pen is a sense which I am *made* to make, I have not made sense. Hence a computer, even one that can register your spoken words and provide spoken output in response, can never genuinely understand anything – as in John Searle's (1980) famous 'Chinese room' thought-experiment. Correspondingly, a sense made in language is brought forth freely on a template of experience shared in meaning, in essentially the way in which an agent brings forth his or her actions, and a tree unfurls its leaves, on templates respectively of character and arboreal nature. We take this fundamental creativity for granted in making justificatory sense of anything, and so it cannot itself be justified. But one can, as I have sought in this chapter and the previous one to do, so call attention to its pervading our experience that it is *revealed*, rather than proven, to be the informing principle both of life itself and of the lifeworld which we inhabit.

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Creativity and the world *an sich*

But how could life's creativity be thus fundamental? For surely creativity cannot really be thought of at all except as a manifestation of the activity of life. And how could *life itself* be fundamental? How could it be where our metaphysical understanding must come finally to rest?

Our resistance to this possibility comes to us along with the conviction that things must be underlyingly *somehow* for there to be lifeworlds at all – our own life-formed realities of nature and value being among them. Species-specific lifeworlds, including ours, are on this picture metaphysically grounded in an ultimate disposition of things about which even humans can know nothing except that it obtains – since everything we *can* know pertains to the empirical detail or *a priori* spatiotemporal structure of our human lifeworld, the world as life-formed for our sensory and cognitive engagement (and the philosophy and natural sciences to which it leads). That ultimate disposition of things is what Kant thought of as the domain of the *an sich* or *in itself*, of 'things in themselves' or noumena as distinct from the phenomena of experience:

For the world is a sum of appearances; and there must therefore be some transcendental ground of the appearances, that is, a ground which is thinkable only by the pure understanding. (Kant 1787/1933: B723-4)

In deep-naturalist terms, the equivalent thought is that there must be something, some ultimate set of arrangements of which we can know only the necessity, prior to our lifeworld of nature and in which its life-formedness, like that of the *Umwelten* of other conscious creatures, is grounded.

Those ultimate arrangements, on this picture, must account for the sensations out of which, as we have seen, reflexive consciousness realises a domain of external spatiotemporal objects over against the perceiving subject. We are apt to think of sensation as simply given in its various modes of sight, sound and the rest – Kant, in presenting this starting-point, exemplifies 'what belongs to sensation' in terms of 'impenetrability, hardness, colour...' (1787/1933: A20/B35) But this cannot be the whole story, because these modalities are differentiated for us not just absolutely (as in the sheer irreducible distinction between, say, taste and touch), but also in their tacit *relation to a centre* – sight and sound presenting us with fields of comparatively distal awareness where taste and touch are intimately proximal, with smell somewhere in between. The role of this centre in shaping what it encounters as sensation is primordial. That is, indeed, a logical requirement; we

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can come to know later and empirically that our particular sensory armature is species-specific – that colour stacks up differently for dogs, wood is not impenetrable to woodworms and so forth – but we can readily grasp *a priori* that nothing can be just blankly *given*, but must also be *taken* acceptingly by a distinct recipient. The ‘givenness’ in sensation out of which reflexive consciousness makes the empirical world is actually realised by the centredness to which it is given, and we can think of what might have preceded that realisation only as the *potential* for sensation. But equally, what comes with sensation as thus formative of its specificity is that recognition of an active self-realising centredness which we have seen to constitute our *a priori* understanding of our own life-form as a manifestation of creative life.

Thus, all we can say about the world *an sich* from the side of perception, as it were, is that it must be such as to answer to what we apprehend as a creative *nisus* or drive realising the roots of the perceptually empirical out of available potentialities. Kant thought of the grounding of sensation in terms of ‘things in themselves’, in effect as a kind of proto-objects, because his overwhelmingly dominant model for anything which could be a world-in-itself was the then-ruling Newtonian paradigm of material objects in motion or at rest. But we today have in the background to our thinking about these matters the strikingly different quantum idea of energy as basic potentiality. As the philosophical physicist Werner Heisenberg put this (1959: 160), in quantum physics, ‘the atoms or the elementary particles ... form a world of potentialities or possibilities rather than one of things or facts.’ And we also have, or we can think our way to, the idea of creative realising activity which is the fundamentally necessary complement to this picture of fundamental potentiality. (For a world comprising *only* potentialities would never have been able to yield anything actual: possibilities involved only with other possibilities must remain permanently only possible.) Our conjoined intuitions of this field of potentialities and of the creativity through which they must be variously realised are thus as near to an intimation of what is ultimate as human minds seem able to come.

But this is to recognise *life* as ultimate for our understanding. The union of potentiality and creativity is both life’s profoundest characteristic, and only graspable in terms of life. It is the idea of a prompting which is only *there*, only realised, in the response which it prompts: and that notion, evidently indefensible for ordinary logic, is what I have set out to show as nevertheless vitally coherent by appealing to the pervasive experience of creativity in our own lives and in life at large. By this point there will, I hope, be less resistance to the recognition that without that logic-defying conception we can simply make no sense of living process and life-

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affordance. The earth-tremor is the natural force it is, independently of whether or not it demolishes the building, but the sunlight is only a nurturing influence on the tree, an affordance to it, insofar as it is taken up as such in the very growth and exfoliation which it nurtures. It is, precisely, a potential prompting realised as such only in the response prompted – and this, generalised, must be understood as the multiplicity of life-affordance constituted as such by the inner principle of the life thus enabled and supported. Life, that is, brings itself forth perpetually, undeniably and fundamentally, as nothing which we encounter as merely material and mechanical can do. That is why every attempt to explain life in terms of materiality runs up, as we have seen, against some version of what is basically the good old chicken-and-egg problem. And this radically inexplicable creativity lies at the root of the process through which life in its specifically human manifestation constitutes, out of what we cannot think of except as bare potentiality, the objective world of nature and the domain of value which afford us respectively habitation and meaning. Creative life as we actually encounter it, in the first instance in our own case, is both epistemologically and ontologically as deep as we can go, because not only all our knowledge (including of a vastly extensive cosmos embracing empirical life), but all the possible objects of our knowledge, are ultimately life-formed.

Such a world-picture plainly calls for a reorientation and recasting of the scientific, flat-naturalistic understanding of the world which most readers are likely to have become accustomed to accepting. It might, indeed, present itself as so startling a departure from mainstream thinking as to be intellectually foolhardy. That impression, however, depends on where one looks for the mainstream. A.N. Whitehead, for instance, clearly anticipated what I have just sketched when he pointed out a hundred years ago that

neither physical nature nor life can be understood unless we fuse them together as essential factors in the composition of ‘really real’ things whose interconnections and individual characters constitute the universe,

and correspondingly that ‘creative activity ... is the process of eliciting into actual being factors in the universe which antecedently to that process exist only in the mode of unrealised potentialities’. (Whitehead 1938/1968: 150, 151)

The Whitehead of these remarks stands in a tradition of ‘process philosophy’ going back through Bergson and Leibniz to Heraclitus. But there is no denying that seeing creative activity as in this way fundamental runs directly counter to the view of the world embedded in commonsense understanding since the Scientific Revolution (and still dominant despite the recent supersession of Newtonian physics

Creativity and the world as such

among actual physicists): the view in which bits of matter, ranging in scale from the molecular to the galactic, subsist and move around in otherwise empty space, and life on the one planet where we know it to have emerged is a statistically-improbable cosmic accident. This picture still dominates because there is an important sense in which it is correct – it expresses, with various theoretical extensions, the way our life-form of reflexive consciousness binds us to construct an objectualised world. What it also does, taken flat-naturalistically, is to occlude the constructive process itself and the status of that world as human lifeworld; recuperating this occlusion, deep naturalism as we have seen insists on the primacy of creative life. That is really no more than to insist both that life cannot be cosmically accidental, a chance by-product of dead matter, and that the world which it informs must be intelligible. For as Whitehead also tells us in a very pregnant passage (1938/1968: 135):

... a dead nature can give no reasons. All ultimate reasons are in terms of aims at value. A dead nature aims at nothing. It is the essence of life that it exists for its own sake, as the intrinsic reaping of value.

Life, that is, always unfolding itself in active becoming, must be inherently directed (becoming *something*, rather than something else, as the reason for this rather than that development), and thus inherently aimed at the satisfaction of that directedness, which is its pervasive ‘reaping of value’. It is only on such terms that we can understand activity, as opposed to mere motion, as the universal principle; for mere motion is inexplicable except by reference to prior motion, and so, finally, is flatly inexplicable. (This is of course the same point as I was making earlier in relation to Kant’s First Antinomy.)

Importantly, however, the deep-naturalist account I have been assembling does not understand activity as a universal principle in Whitehead’s kind of way. He came from a background of philosophy of science engaging with early quantum physics, and also from a Bergson-inspired recognition that the classic Newtonian picture of the universe as a regular sequence of material states obtaining at durationless instants was inherently inconsistent, since it made change-dependent phenomena like velocity and momentum into abstractions rather than basic physical realities. His alternative vision was of the universe as fundamentally a manifold of pulses of activity, inconceivable except as a permanent process of change, of becoming and perishing or ‘coming to pass’. Reality for him comes down to a matter of how things are realising themselves in one or another local phase of the universe’s endless transition from past to future. That transition must therefore be understood by analogy with the behaviour of a free agent, rather than that of a mechanical

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system: the advance into novelty by ongoing self-invention which we have seen to make sense of our own free agency. For understanding that advance we need, as we have also seen, the idea of creativity, and this does indeed figure prominently in Whitehead's system. But he finds himself having to ascribe it to the universe as a whole, as 'the universal of universals characterising ultimate matter of fact': a kind of cosmic 'principle of novelty' which 'lies in the nature of things' (1938/1968: 21). He has to make out of it, in other words, something that purports to be metaphysically and ontologically *deeper* than life as we both experience it and grasp it *a priori* within ourselves – the only context in which actually we can understand 'creative self-realisation' as a principle at all.

But there *is* nothing metaphysically and ontologically deeper than life in that sense. That is the ultimate message of deep naturalism: we humans are at bottom *animals*, and as such should not expect to be able to reach in comprehension beyond the life in which we have our being. We are always being tempted to say, 'Life must come from *somewhere*' or 'The sensation which is primordial life-experience must be occasioned by *something*', but whenever we try to grasp these groundings of the living in terms of something else, we are brought back to the appeal to life and its creative power. The objective material world is inexplicable except as our lifeworld, constructed in creative activity for which our only framing is life-process, and the sensations in which that construction is based are inexplicable except as potential affordances through which our life-form realises itself. What lies, and must lie, at the bottom of everything for us is just our inhabited animal existence. Both Kant in his positing of the inaccessibly noumenal, 'thinkable only by the pure understanding', and Whitehead in his alienation of creative activity from our experienced existence to the preceding and grounding universe, are victims of the standing philosophical presumption that humans are somehow equipped, uniquely, to escape their animal situatedness when they think themselves and their condition as though from beyond it. The rejection of that presumption – the radically bioegalitarian insistence – should not prove a step too far for those who come to the ultimacy of living creativity by the route which we have pursued through specifically environmental philosophy.

A look back – and forward

It is perhaps time to re-emphasise that environmental philosophy is indeed what we have been concerned with all along – though its character as such might have

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been somewhat submerged through the last four chapters. Some retrospective summarising of this third Part of the book may help here.

Its first chapter (Chapter 6) launched the question of whether we could make sense of a radical levelling of humanity with other forms of life – far more effectually a levelling, that is, than the pseudo-equalities of environmental ethics, and altogether transcending empirical considerations in terms of which humans just are, inescapably, the now dominant world-shaping species. This was the levelling that went with accepting the world of nature (along, on essentially similar terms, with the world of value) as the human lifeworld projected by, and necessarily taken as real for, our human life-form: the account which, in all its paradoxicality as it relates specifically to nature, I have called deep naturalism. I have argued that we can both accept and defend that account. In the course of my defence, it has emerged that the deep principle of that levelling lies in the manifestation throughout human life, from the high achievements of art and scientific theorising right down to the intuitive action of reflexive consciousness as it generates our lifeworld, of the creativity which informs all species being as the core drive or *nisus* of life itself. That creative principle we have revealed and recognised – though not, in the nature of the case, proven – to be known to us *a priori*. Thus I have tried to show deep naturalism to be the true form of that understanding of humanity's place in relation to other life, for which Naess and others were reaching with the idea of biocentric egalitarianism, but misguidedly sought to cash out in ethical terms. It is, rather, a fundamentally metaphysical form of understanding, and it answers as such to my contention in the Introduction that philosophy with this 'environmental' impetus, properly pursued, takes us as deep as any philosophy can.

Deep naturalism so understood does not in any way compromise our legitimately physical understanding of the world of nature, though it offers us as the metaphysical basis of that understanding the origination of causally-organised spatiotemporality in the creative life-necessities of human thought. It does not differ from what I have labelled 'flat' naturalism in how it takes the world to *be*: its difference is at the level of its taking the grounding of that being as not independent of humanity, but rather as lying in capacities for configuring experience which belong to our particular species' form of life. Its essence is to draw no final distinction between how the world as we find it *is*, and how that sensory and cognitive architecture must shape it into being. It thus, as we have seen, accords ultimacy to *life*, rather than to spatiotemporal materiality as finally inexplicable, which a flat-naturalistic vision is bound to do. (We can conceive coherently neither

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of spacetime's coming objectively into existence – where and when? – nor of its empty preceding the material universe from eternity, since such an 'existence' is indistinguishable from non-existence.) Nor does it encourage any appeal to the religiously-intuited will of some Omnipotence in bringing forth that universe. It is in these characteristics a decisively post-Darwinian metaphysic: from the (empirical) premise that what is generally true of the evolutionary emergence of animal species will be true in the human case as well, it prompts the conclusion that what is true of the relation between conscious organisms and their environments or *Umwelten* must also be true of that between humans and (what we take to be) *the* environment, the human lifeworld. As such, it is an understanding of reality deeply conditioned by historical circumstance – in that sense, an historicist understanding. Equally as such, it brings out how that kind of understanding and *realism* are no more finally separable than are realism and idealism. For, as Hilary Putnam points out in his *Reason, Truth and History*, we cannot (except self-defeatingly) think of 'how things are for beings such as us' on the one hand, and how things *really* are on the other (Putnam 1981: 1-21) – our representation of how things are can only be meaningful if we take it as already referring to how they really are. (This, it will be remarked, is the same recognition as was called forth by the phenomenological heresy in Chapter 8.)

The belief, however, that the distinction between the physical and the metaphysical cannot be drawn – that all our grasp of the world properly to be called 'understanding' is ultimately expressible in physical terms – pervades our culture as scientism. That belief has played a crucial role, through its disposing us to externalise and manipulate nature, and its corollary that every life-challenge we encounter has a scientifically-backed technological resolution at least in principle, in bringing humanity to its presently dire environmental pass. In a historicist, indeed an Hegelian spirit, one might see its having done so as the collapse into contradiction of a thesis to which the deep-ecological intuition of the 'green turn' has arisen over the last sixty years or so as inevitable antithesis, with deep naturalism recognisable as the emerging synthesis: the physical world for natural science as springing livingly out of human creativity.

So this has all along still been *environmental* philosophy. We have been concerned, that is, with the philosophical probing of issues around the human place in, or vis-à-vis, the empirical world of nature, which have themselves been foregrounded, with ever more clamant practical urgency, by humanity's exercise – or usurpation – of a lethal and seemingly ungovernable dominance now visibly laying

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waste to that world. We have seen how the deep-ecological movement of recoil from that destructive dominance is essentially an intuition of human participation in the indefeasible creativity of life. And here we should also recall from Chapter 5 the least comfortable plank of the Deep Ecology platform, which remains firmly in place (and just as uncomfortable) even when we have replaced all the insufficiently load-bearing quasi-ethical planks. This is the one which enjoins on those who endorse that bio-egalitarian intuition ‘an obligation directly or indirectly to participate in the attempt to implement the necessary changes’.

So what are the particular obligations, in this regard, of those who have come to understand humans and the natural world as standing in anything like the kind of relation I have been outlining? In practice, that comes to the question: what are the obligations of those who, as part of the broadly ‘green’ turn, are motivated by the powerfully non-anthropocentric intuition distinguishing its characteristic cast of mind, once they have come through the metaphysical problematic which that intuition generates to an appreciation of the fundamental role of living creativity in any defensible naturalism? And what difference might that recognition make to what they think of as the necessary changes, and to how they might be called on to participate in implementing them? With these questions, we pass from general environmental philosophy to the more immediately practical (and hence, as will appear, even more controversial) domain of environmental-political philosophy.

PART IV.
LIFEWORLD POLITICS

Environmental Epistocracy

At the root of the world, as well as of everything that human beings know and do in the world, lies the creativity of life. That, in a single sentence, is the conclusion to which we have been prompted by thinking philosophically about the structure of our broadly environmental plight and the source of our responsibility to address it. How should that recognition transform the terms of our engagement in collective action?

Expanding on the single sentence in a vividly memorable way are some well-known lines of verse expressing a sense of ‘something far more deeply interfus’d’ than the mere daily business of human life – something

Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns
And the round ocean and the living air
And the blue sky, and in the mind of Man;
A motion and a spirit which impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things...

(Wordsworth 1798/1963: 116)

Although Wordsworth’s aspiration to write a great philosophical epic was misguided, he captures here by poetic means the essential philosophical insight into humanity-in-nature towards which we have been working through ten chapters. Or, as one might alternatively say: we have demonstrated discursively and at length that this poetic apprehension of a fundamental world-informing creative principle registers a profound metaphysical truth. The picture of a vibrant globe intimated in that imagery of evening horizon, encircling ocean and embracing atmosphere, a globe driven round in its course by an energy which is both physical and non-physical force (‘A motion and a spirit’), brilliantly encapsulates the deep-naturalist intuition of *lifeworld*, with the creative principle of life, of the open-ended bringing-forth of potential, at the core of all our objective and subjective understanding. And it emphasises better than any drily philosophical presentation could do the raw emotional power of that recognition. For we cannot sincerely grasp our deep relation to the world in anything like that way, without an accompanying decisive recoil from what we also know present human activity to be doing in and to that world.

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Crucial to that recoil is our relation to other life. For, on the deep naturalist picture, that relation must be radically different from how we stand to anything else within the world of our experience. Everything thus encountered, other living things included, is empirically real, necessarily cast by our life-formed mode of receptivity as part of a spatiotemporal domain of objects governed by the laws of causality. In other life, however, we meet not just its empirical existence on those terms, within the lifeworld, but the constant, unfailing upwelling and upsurge of the very principle of life-creativity which generates that lifeworld itself. Especially in our inevitably sympathetic identification with other animality, we hear our ordinary, taken-for-granted world of objects pulse with our own pervasive animal being, of which it is the permanently realised expression. Generally, therefore, in our relation to life as we meet and deal with it empirically, the whole world is always at stake in this *sui generis* metaphysical way. This is what makes the gross and unremitting assault on the biosphere that has become the signature of modern civilisation so uniquely appalling – as neither injustice among humans, nor the imposition of misery on sentience, nor anything else which can be reprehended in merely moral terms is appalling, terrible though those disfigurements of the lifeworld may be. Here we need to reach for something like the old, widely discarded and supposedly discredited religious category of *sin*. The whole structure and tenor of the megalopolitan way of being, dependent as it is on ripping out ecosystemic complexity for the purposes of crude resource acquisition, rendering swathes of the planet hostile to life if not uninhabitable, and travestyng the natural not just at large but as it cries out for acknowledgement through our own alienated animality, sins profoundly against the spirit. It disgraces and betrays what we cannot help dimly intuiting – even before we call the deep naturalist account in aid – to be the essential principle upholding the world. Our collective assault on the biosphere then comes home to us, starkly and painfully, as a grievous betrayal of the vital impulse by which we ourselves, each one of us, must live.

It is this reaction, carrying over into practical exigency, which gives the politics of climate and ecological crisis its unique character. Seen in this light, organised opposition to casual life-destructiveness as a way of human being (rejection of which is at the heart of concern about both climate and ecological threats) becomes a very different matter from any politics of pragmatic situation management or negotiated accommodation between conflicting sectoral interests. It must, at the least, be an *uncompromising* politics, a politics of removing intolerable blockages to life – one in which, for those on the side of life, failure is such an insufferable prospect that the

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courage is called forth to do whatever may be necessary to avoid it. And if we look back in history for examples of political activity that took itself to be confronting not merely opponents but *sin*, there are precedents which, compared with what we have come to expect of our own politics, may be found disturbing. One thinks for instance of the words that Thomas Carlyle (1888: 359) puts into the mouths of Cromwell's armed Saints, contemplating the Rump Parliament's last nervous effort to stay in power by introducing manhood suffrage: 'the great numerical majority of England was always indifferent to our Cause ... It is in weight and force, not by counting of heads, that we are the majority!' Here, explicitly, is the cardinal issue for any new politics which might answer the call of life-responsibility.

Environmental awareness and concern have, indeed, long been held to call for a new kind of politics. Jonathon Porritt put this with polemical pugnacity forty years ago, when he claimed that 'green politics has something totally different to say and a totally different way of saying it'. (Porritt 1984: 14) The different message was broadly about the need for all human activity to be rendered sustainable, for justice to govern the societal reconfigurations which that would entail and for a non-anthropocentric attitude to the protection of the living world. The different approach to putting it across was a matter of striking out from the 'old ideologies' of left, right and centre which had shaped the political dialogue of the industrial age. But from the deepest underlying assumptions of conventional modernity, green politics has never really struck out or shaken itself free. The prominent eco-political philosopher Robyn Eckersley, for instance, argues that democracy is

not merely an incidental or desirable 'add-on' to the green case, but rather an essential requirement of the achievement of green goals ... If [these] are to be achieved, what is needed are participatory or deliberative forms of dialogue which enable a free and rational evaluation of common or generalisable interests, where decisions are reached by the force of the better argument. (Eckersley 2001: 322)

And it is fair to say that practical environmental politics worldwide has always conducted itself very much in this spirit, taking as completely unquestionable the established Enlightenment conceptual framework for these matters, in which (as John Stuart Mill formulated it), 'the ideally best form of government is that in which the sovereignty, or supreme controlling power in the last resort, is vested in the entire aggregate of the community'. (Mill 1861/1972: 206)

I want in the final part of this book, however, to build a philosophical case for recognising that lifeworld politics – political attention to our current plight informed by what I will call, in shorthand, the creative principle of life – requires an

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epochal move beyond these long-embedded assumptions. It is not just that democratic states have systematically failed to confront the climate and ecological crisis, which would be a very reasonable empirical observation – one based, as we noted in the Introduction, on steadily increasing scientific corroboration of anthropogenic damage, met with half-measures and reluctant foot-dragging among democratic politicians always apprehensive about their electoral bases. Nor is it only a matter of justifiable doubt as to whether a system which has so far degenerated as to be capable of empowering (never mind of re-empowering) malignant buffoons like Trump or Johnson, could ever be trusted with the future habitability of the planet. It is not even that the developments which have facilitated this degeneration (in turn the gutter press, the television and latterly the be-your-own-idiot incitements of the twitter-sphere) render so sadly ironic the claim that democracy respects ‘the force of the better argument’. Much more fundamentally, the point is that governing our natural relations within the lifeworld framing and in the context of environmental emergency now calls on human creative energies the force and authority of which are no longer widely recognised, and proper submission to which the whole democratic paradigm tends to defeat. But the very nature of this new context means that these energies must now be brought to bear in a concentrated way if we are to stand any real chance of civilisational recovery.

What that might mean in terms of actual political and para-political activity is beyond the scope of a philosophy book. But if the conceptual challenge to long-established political-philosophical habits of thinking which I mount in these two concluding chapters is even partially successful, my hope is that it will clear the way towards bold practicalities as yet barely imaginable. For that, however daunting, seems to be the scale of the transformative demand which our collective plight now makes on the specifically political philosophy of the environment.

Democracy and its alternatives

Before embarking for these wilder shores, it will be helpful to consider a case made from within more-or-less conventional political theory for questioning Eckersley’s routine assumption that environmental politics must take a democratic form. This is the case that environmental crisis now calls, more insistently than any political context has ever done before, for *epistocracy*, or rule by the intelligent and informed.

Regarding democracy, Churchill famously offered in 1946 a rather more sardonic – or, perhaps one should say, a more realistic – take on it than Mill, when he observed that it had been called ‘the worst form of government except

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for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time' (Churchill 2008: 574). Democracy, that was to acknowledge, has many drawbacks. It is messy, disputatious and (as Churchill himself had experienced not long before making his speech) awkwardly unpredictable. It encourages, indeed thrives on, contestation. And, in its most basic form, the deciding of contested political questions by that counting of heads which Carlyle's Puritans so emphatically scorned, it allocates the same weight to the votes of ignorant, mistaken or irrational electors (who in any real human community will inevitably predominate) as to those of the educated, informed and reflective.

Nonetheless, its more disillusioned defenders will claim, these characteristics still disadvantage it significantly less than those of its various competitors disadvantage them. It is comparatively easy to make that case in relation to the despotic, oligarchic or aristocratic arrangements which actually preceded in the historical record the modern emergence of democracy. A despotic monarchy, in any but the most primitive society, demands far more by way of executive capacity and moral energy from its ruler, in order to improve or even broadly to maintain the general welfare, than can reasonably be expected from a single individual however competent or well-meaning; and it usually depends for even the limited degree of competence which it can reasonably expect on the operation of a genetic lottery. (If it is an elective monarchy, by contrast, it builds in periodic internecine strife between powerful aspirants to the throne.) An oligarchy, or rule of a selected few, while slightly mitigating the capacity objection, is almost certain to be distorted in its public activities by excessive attention to defending the interests of the particular class or section from which the governing clique is drawn. Aristocratic rule by a caste of 'the best people', meanwhile, will always in practice mean government by the entitled descendants of people who might have been best for some earlier phase of the society's existence, but whose scions rule – as those of Norman and Plantagenet chivalry still ruled eighteenth-century England – largely in the interests of the past.

As well as these respective failings, all these modes of government share the very major drawback that they leave the people at large as passive political subjects, their affairs shaped by decrees from above accepted in traditional obedience or through deferential habit, and enforced where necessary by physical compulsion. Being placed in that relation to importantly framing features of one's own existence will tend (a point on which Mill was particularly insistent) to stifle initiative and deter responsible activity, not just in the political sphere where these virtues find no scope, but across the board. It will tend towards social stasis, not because people

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necessarily welcome or cherish a given status quo, but through the encouragement and embedding of collective and individual inertia.

These various signal disadvantages of non-democratic forms of government, considered instrumentally as means to social harmony and well-being, are of course quite aside from the claim which many defenders of democracy will also advance (and may indeed regard as decisive, instrumental considerations apart), that democratic forms embody fundamental human rights to self-determination and express the basic equality of moral respect to which all are entitled. As the American philosopher Robert Nozick formulates the latter component of this claim,

Democratic institutions and the liberties coordinated with them are not simply effective means toward controlling the powers of government and directing these powers toward matters of joint concern; they themselves express and symbolise, in a pointed and official way, our equal human dignity, our autonomy and powers of self-direction. (Nozick 1990: 286)

One may legitimately be sceptical about rights-language in this connection (does our 'right to self-determination' really precede and justify the emergence of democratic forms, or is it another way of expressing our *post hoc* commitment to them?). Equally, one may question, as does Jason Brennan, whether there is any necessity residing in the expressive relation:

Suppose I believe that in some sense every person's life is worth as much as any other's. Or suppose I believe that a just political system ought to treat every citizen as if their life and interests were equally important ... There is no obvious logical entailment from these general commitments to a commitment to democracy or representative government of any form. (Brennan 2016: 117)

There is nevertheless no denying the rhetorical power of thus linking head-counting to the equal moral standing of the persons sporting the heads.

It is indeed owing in considerable measure to this rhetorical effect that the really serious alternative to democracy tends to get dismissed along with the historically-credentialed (or, tried-and-failed) contenders that we have just reviewed. This is the alternative which puts a premium on what is *inside* the heads. Despite having been canvassed as long ago as Plato's *Republic*, it has never yet been tried in an explicit form – although different tacit versions of it have arguably saved instantiations of all the other forms (democracy included) from doing more human damage than actually they have done. This is what David Estlund first labelled *epistocracy*, or rule by the knowers: that is, the formal distribution of political power according to criteria of relevant knowledge, skill and competence. As such, it is not confined

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to Plato's rather implausible platoon of trained philosophers, but can take a variety of more practicable shapes: it can be implemented through a suffrage restricted by tests of knowledge or competence, or through Mill's favoured option of plural voting (extra votes for the demonstrably educated), or through institutional arrangements giving veto power to appropriately qualified and supported bodies. But all these are ways of embodying a general position which Estlund spells out as holding that political decisions can be better or worse by objective standards (whether of justice or the promotion of collective welfare); that some people (inevitably a minority) are better acquainted with these standards, more intelligently capable of framing goals accordant with them and more competent at guiding the pursuit of those goals than their fellow-citizens; and that those people are thereby warranted in exercising political authority over the rest. (Estlund 2008: 30)

This is, in other words, an avowedly elitist position – which, where the rhetoric of democratic egalitarianism prevails and *elitism* is merely a term of vulgar abuse, is normally sufficient to rule it out of serious consideration. The question is, though, whether it ought to do so.

One prompting towards asking this question seriously is that epistocracy does indeed, in principle anyway, compare very favourably with the other alternatives to democracy. It disposes of the competence objection by definition. It is not, at any rate *prima facie*, subject to distortion by vested interests, since its only such interest appears to be in the truth and the most effective service of truth. That might sound utopian, and obviously cadres of the knowledgeable are subject to professional rivalries and many of the other temptations to small-mindedness which beset all human group activity, but their right to rule is established by criteria that also specifically call on them to rise above these failings. By the same token, those criteria are directly relevant to the exercise of political authority, rather than largely or wholly irrelevant, as are birth or membership of some historically-powerful section or class. Furthermore, as long as recruitment to the ruling body, or possession of the qualifications for voting or other participant status, remain open to talent (as the very nature of those criteria require), then there is no disincentive to active self-development and the associated initiative and responsibility among the population at large. And of course, as well as lacking the drawbacks of democracy's competitors, epistocracy also lacks the principal drawback of democracy itself – the empowering of ignorant, misinformed and irrational people to set, or significantly to distort, the socio-political agenda for the rest of us. (Epistocracy, one can be confident, would never have saddled anyone with a Brexit, or a Trump.)

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Crucially, moreover, the question ‘Why not epistocracy?’ ought to be recognised as especially pressing in our current unprecedented situation. For that situation can be characterised by two broad claims, neither of which is plausibly deniable. Firstly, we are confronting an emergency potentially catastrophic for global humanity which we should neither *know to exist*, nor have even the remotest idea of how to tackle, except for our dependence on various expert knowers (climate and biological scientists, ecologists, energy economists and technologists.) And secondly, as already noted, the assembled global resources of democratic governance have so far proven lamentably inadequate to dealing with this threat. Might not epistocracy’s historical moment (it seems reasonable in this context to ask) at last have arrived?

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There is certainly a strong case to be made for epistocratic government in the face of climate and ecological emergency.

For the negative side of this case – the argument that vesting political authority in anyone *other* than the intelligent and knowledgeable is now increasingly perilous – we can amplify the point just made about the nature of that emergency. I have in fact already done this in a comparatively recent book, where I pointed out that intelligence is required just to recognise that there *is* a climate emergency. Events like the 2019 Australian bush fires or the Los Angeles New Year inferno of 2025 do not have ‘climate change’ written on their faces, consisting at worst only of weather and its effects; the idea of climate requires an interpretive understanding and contextualising of these experiences. Such understanding need not depend on a scientific training, but it does presuppose attention to a wide range of information and to the analyses of this information offered by relevant expertise. And as I also noted,

for thinking both critically and to the point about these analyses, it presupposes too a degree of common-sense statistical alertness, enabling probabilities to be compared and associated consequences to be pragmatically weighed ... The intelligence needed for recognition of our present plight must be adequate to systemic complexity in a way which has never before been demanded of ordinary thinking people. (Foster 2022: 150)

Nor of course is it just a matter of intelligence. Properly to register the various dangers – that is, to appreciate them in their full human context, requires also virtues which a good education should strongly develop in association with

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the intelligence adequate to complex threats: virtues of reflective imagination (to make vivid to oneself the full practical consequences threatened), and also of intellectual honesty (not to flinch from admitting, to oneself as much as to others, what one understands) and of simple courage (to bear appropriate witness). But only a minority will have received, and only a significantly smaller majority will have been capable of sufficiently profiting from, a good education in that sense.

It is also important to emphasise that the body of expertise on which such general intelligence must draw for its grasp of the crisis is now increasingly unanimous about the extreme urgency of our grasping it. The *2024 State of the Climate Report* co-authored by fourteen eminent climate scientists from around the world, begins starkly:

We are on the brink of an irreversible climate disaster. This is a global emergency beyond any doubt. Much of the very fabric of life on Earth is imperilled. For many years, scientists ... have sounded the alarm about the impending dangers of climate change driven by increasing greenhouse gas emissions and ecosystem change ... Despite these warnings, we are still moving in the wrong direction. (Ripple et al. 2024: 1)

It is hardly possible, one would have supposed, for relevant knowledge to be brought to bear on what ought to be the clamantly overriding political agenda more unambiguously than that. The Report summarises analyses which support the assessment of that concluding sentence in relation to human population, energy consumption, tree cover loss, CO₂ and methane emissions, sea ice cover and a wide range of other indicators. And yet, as it also tells us, nearly eighty per cent of a representative cohort of senior climate scientists expect that global average temperatures will increase by at least 2.5°C above pre-industrial levels by the end of the century, with more than half of these believing that the increase will in fact reach or exceed 3°C – well into the range within which lethally destructive runaway warming could be triggered. That is, those who know best what is happening now have little or no confidence in the current global process, shaped and orchestrated by the world's major democracies under the auspices of the United Nations, which is supposed to be addressing it. (The Report tactfully avoids drawing this conclusion in so many words, but it remains glaringly apparent nonetheless.)

Nor is that lack of confidence anything but wholly justified. As noted earlier, the global process has always been grievously hampered, and periodically sabotaged, by the dependence of democratic politicians (even those whose good faith is not in question) on the need to carry their electorates with them. Majorities in all those

electorates comprise people who lack the capacities just sketched for understanding and appreciating what is really at stake, and thus for responding appropriately. Surveys such as that already cited in Chapter 1 showing that 74 per cent of adults are ‘concerned about the climate crisis’ are only encouraging in this connection so long as one closes one’s eyes to what, supposedly motivated by that concern, they keep on doing – when, for instance, fuel tax rises are threatened or it is time to book the annual flight to the sunshine. And such immediate preoccupations with the economic requirements of getting by and with the forms of consumption providing for relief or escape are of course entirely understandable among ordinary citizens; so, by the same token, is the inescapable limitation to short-term electoral considerations which they enforce on democratic political systems, and which is radically at odds with the demands of any genuinely sustainable regime of living, producing and consuming.

So it would seem clear, at least in principle, that if we are to have any chance of avoiding the catastrophic future feared by those who know best, we should now be taking political authority out of the hands of those whose capacities and situation mean that they know, and are incentivised to care, the least.

Equally, some general objections to epistocratic arrangements, and corresponding claims on behalf of democratic ones, simply lose in this emergency context any cogency they might otherwise have had. That democracy signals respect for the equal right to self-determination, and ultimately for the equal moral status, of every sane adult may be an important consideration. There may indeed be situations falling within the scope of ordinary politics – policy issues around fiscal matters, say, or public order requirements or employment rights – where making our decisions by democratic processes which embody such respect is more important than reaching what might be the ideally best decisions according to epistocratic criteria. But faced with the kind of emergency which now confronts humanity, such comparative evaluations must fall by the wayside. If we are to talk in terms of rights at all, the right of present and future generations to a humanly-habitable Earth surely trumps all other rights-claims: there is no opportunity for equal voice to be heard or equal respect to flourish on a dead planet, or in the aftermath of any recognisable civilisation. And the scientific testimony should leave us in no doubt that the stakes are really that high. The criteria of value for a system of government must become unambiguously instrumental in conditions of existential crisis.

Along the same lines, the ‘demographic objection’ to epistocracy, on which Estlund lays much stress, ceases to carry any weight. It runs thus in his formulation:

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‘The educated portion of the populace may disproportionately have epistemically damaging features that countervail the admitted epistemic benefits of education.’ (Estlund 2008: 215) The thought is that people who have benefitted from the kind of education which develops general intelligence and associates it with imagination, honesty and courage are, at least in Western society as presently organised, disproportionately likely to be white, middle-class and to come from homes in economically comfortable circumstances. Since people even of goodwill are liable to be biased, if only unconsciously, by such origins, increasing their political authority vis-à-vis those with different backgrounds will compound the social effects of that bias, and may lead to the downgrading or undervaluing of non-privileged perspectives when decisions affecting the common welfare must be taken. This, as he points out, is the argument against, for instance, those literacy tests for the franchise which, as we have noted earlier, were once deployed in the post-bellum US South – their (wholly intentional) effect of excluding poor southern blacks from voting, on the face of it epistocratically justifiable (surely voters must at minimum be literate?), in fact served to deprive the political process of ‘an *epistemically* important perspective on a leading form of injustice’ (ibid.), the perspective of those largely suffering under the various forms of discrimination still prevailing. But again, in the stark light of the climate emergency, such biases and their effects fade into insignificance. Objecting to the authority of the educated and intelligent in confronting the climate and ecological crisis, if we are really to take that crisis as seriously as the assembled scientists urge, would be rather like objecting that Battle of Britain Spitfire pilots came disproportionately from the foxhunting classes whose youth had acquired in the saddle the delicacy of touch needed for handling a fighter aeroplane. If it takes reliance on, or even reinforcing, the upshots of *any* form of privilege in order to save the human future, then surely so be it – now as then, and for as long as it takes.

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There remains, however, a serious difficulty with epistocracy which manifests itself very clearly in the climate and ecological context. We may label it the ‘Says who?’ question. Jonathan Wolff (2006: 1) has noted the old adage that there are only two questions in political philosophy, ‘Who gets what?’ and ‘Says who?’ – and the latter is evidently the deeper one, since issues of distribution are finally to be resolved by the incidence of power. This question arises in the epistocratic case out of important differences between the nature of scientific and that of political *authority*.

The authority of the climate scientists of that 2024 Report to identify what has been happening to a range of parameters which they have selected as reliable indicators, and to base quantified predictions of intensifying feedback on the trajectories of those indicators, derives from their established expertise in all the relevant fields on which the publication draws. That expertise will have been empirically based – it will be a matter of their having each produced a body of observational and analytic work that has stood up effectively to the peer review and experimental replication in which the scientific process essentially consists. The authoritativeness of their statements about how things are in their various areas of concern can thus be taken to be thoroughly backed by how things are actually developing on the face of the Earth and in the atmosphere. Their right to be heard on these matters is epistemically grounded. But political authority is fundamentally the right to make laws controlling the conduct of the population at large, and legitimately to enforce those laws when necessary, and this seems of its nature to resist any claim to an equivalent kind of epistemic basis.

We can see quite clearly why this should be so, if we consider the broad recommendations for global action to which the scientists of the Report commit themselves. These include the introduction of a sufficiently high global carbon price, drastically reduced overconsumption, a gradually reducing human population, more plant-based eating, a post-growth economic framework, the protection, restoration or rewilding of ecosystems and the integration of climate and ecological issues into secondary and higher education. The appearance of such advocacy in such a report can certainly be justified; the authors state plainly and admirably at its outset that

as scientists and academics, we feel it is our moral duty and that of our institutions to alert humanity to the growing threats that we face as clearly as possible and to show leadership in addressing them (Ripple et al. 2024: 1),

and one important way of showing such leadership is to set out the full scale of the changes in those factors driving anthropogenic climate destabilisation and ecological destruction for which the extent of that damage, as identified in the Report, now actually calls. But it is very evident that every one of those broad measures is politically controversial, to put it mildly – the question whether reducing consumption should be a matter of taxation, of rationing or of various forms of prohibition (all potentially explosive policy options even in command economies) being just the most obvious example. And the challenge for any thoroughly epistocratic form of government would then be to identify the modes of expertise appropriate

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to addressing those questions of implementation, once scientific expertise had been accepted as pointing out the broad changes required.

The difficulty is that trying to meet this challenge must involve us in a kind of contestation for which there is no parallel in the scientific realm. Science, of course, as studies in the tradition of Kuhn's work on scientific revolutions (Kuhn 1962) have long recognised, is not innocent of controversies and contests for dominance – but there, all the contestants at least acknowledge the empirical existence of a nature which it is the common target of their efforts to understand, and which must serve as the final tribunal of appeal, even if its judgements can never be delivered entirely uninterpreted. But questions about whose expertise should be relied on in the implementation of such momentous social and economic changes as those just posited, are political or ideological all the way down. Do we turn, for instance, to economists or social psychologists for authoritative guidance on sumptuary policy? – and then, to what sort of economist or psychologist: neoclassical? behaviourist? The point is that the various expert disciplines which might claim relevance to policy decisions, and the contending models of analysis and prescription within those disciplines, embody different guiding assumptions about human nature and motivation, and choice of a preferred expertise is also inevitably a choice between these assumptions. To defer to most standard economists, for instance, on the issue of taxation or rationing to reduce excess consumption, would be to embrace a view of economic rationality which is at best partial, and at worst an ideological shadow of unchallenged capitalism. The economists themselves, however, will say that these are truths about how human beings are and act – something which they have of course a strongly vested intellectual interest in believing, and which capitalist entrepreneurs obviously have other kinds of vested interest in having the rest of us believe. And similar manifestations of implicit partiality, if not perhaps so starkly apparent, will arise in respect of any other potentially relevant expertise. So it would seem that we must fall back on expertise concerning the comparative assumptions and biases of different kinds of expert – and where might *that* be found? The Platonic answer 'in philosophy' could only be offered here by someone very innocent of the way in which similarly ideological considerations inform different approaches within that discipline too – consider only the case of Mill versus Kant, or more recently of (say) John Rawls versus Alasdair MacIntyre.

The 'Says who?' question, it appears, dogs this issue of epistocratic competence implacably. 'We should introduce stringent rationing of carbon-intensive consumer goods' – says who? Answer, perhaps, various economists or behavioural

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scientists – but who says that their expertise, with the assumptions on which it is based, should govern us? Obviously *they* will say so, as will those whose interests those assumptions serve, but for that very reason we are surely entitled to be suspicious of the claim: while if there are claims of which we should be *less* suspicious, again, says who? The contested nature of policy in all these fields of urgently needed transformation feeds back into contestation over what is to count as relevant policy expertise, and then over whose views on what is to count should count ... and so on.

Exposed here, in fact, is an issue with political authority which is not peculiar to the epistocratic context, although it appears vividly there, but quite general in modernity. That condition, observes Charles Taylor, emerged with

our breaking loose from older moral horizons. People used to see themselves as part of a larger order ... a cosmic order, a 'great chain of Being', in which humans figured in their proper place along with angels, heavenly bodies and our fellow earthly creatures. This hierarchical order in the universe was reflected in the hierarchies of human society. (Taylor 1991:3)

In particular, it was reflected in hierarchies of governance which gave to some individuals or classes what was taken to be a naturally-established right to rule over their fellows in a given society. Once this structure began decisively to break down, and the question of who should exercise such rule could no longer be answered by the equivalent of an appeal to how things just naturally were, that question became inescapably moot. Responses to it either made tendentious suppositions about human nature in the pre-social state, as did Hobbes' defence of absolute monarchy as the only mechanism for preventing a permanent 'war of all against all'; or else they appealed, like Locke, to established distributions of property or power in ways which the variously unpersuaded were bound to see as partial and protective of particular interests. As Mill (1861/1972: 209) points out,

we need not suppose that when power resides in an exclusive class, that class will knowingly and deliberately sacrifice the other classes to themselves: it suffices that the interest of the excluded is always in danger of being overlooked.

Societies were thus launched on the long-term trend which has led to the democratic presumptions so widely accepted today. As God's supposed distribution of affairs ceased to provide an apparently decisive answer to the 'Says who?' question regarding who should rule, other answers could successively be seen to reactivate the question in the way which we have just been noting, until we reached an answer beyond which there seemed to be no further appeal: 'Says *everyone*'. For the question 'Who says we should do what everyone agrees should be done?' seems

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self-defeating – or rather, already to have answered itself in the asking. According to Wolff (2006:103), ‘only democracy allows us an answer we can accept to the question “why should these people rule?” or “what makes their rule legitimate?”’ That a democratically taken or endorsed decision can be claimed to speak thus on behalf of the whole community seems to flow from the nature of the terms on which the democratic process is entered into: in expecting that my voice should count equally with that of each other participant, I have already accepted that the majority of voices should decide, since any other method of resolving a difference between numbers of votes cast for one or another option or candidate would have to involve some voice or voices counting *more* than others. But of course, this way of bringing the ‘Says who?’ question to a stand depends entirely on its making political sense that all voices *should* count equally. And this, especially by contrast with the premises of epistocracy, can seem to be a very strange presumption. Why, indeed, should the voices of the ignorant, the misinformed, the casually uninterested, the vigorously prejudiced, the believers in absurd conspiracy theories, the docile adherents of blatant charlatans and all the rest of the epistemically inadequate, ever be thought worth counting equally with those of the relevantly intelligent and informed?

The standard democratic answer, it should now be clear, is really configured by the issues raised by the ‘Says who?’ question and its structure. Mill (1861/1972: 208) holds it to be a proposition

of as universal truth and applicability as any general proposition which can be laid down respecting human affairs ... that each is the only safe guardian of his own rights and interests.

Each person, that is, however epistemically limited in other directions, can be taken to know best what he or she thinks about the affairs of the community and conceives to be in his or her best interest regarding those affairs, and can be expected to exercise the right to vote in accordance with this conception. If everyone involved has the same right, exercises it freely in recognition that everyone else also has it, and recognises too the corresponding duty to accept the majority view, there is no scope for any challenge based on the potential partiality of one class or group as against another, and the political authority of the decision-making process is secured.

We may, indeed, wonder how far this response still holds good in a situation where everyone’s interest is threatened by a climate and ecological emergency of which it requires intelligence and imagination even to become aware as critically threatening. Can people lacking these capacities now plausibly be considered the

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safest guardians of their own real interests in the direction of public policy – any more than the man who doesn't know his beer to be poisoned can be considered the authority of last resort on whether or not he really wants to drink it? But whatever one's intuitions here, there is a further difficulty which is peculiar to the context of our current plight in an altogether deeper way, one which links back to the metaphysics of lifeworld which Part III of the book was articulating: a difficulty arising out of the nature of responsibility.

Fundamental to the defence of democracy against epistocratic challenge is an assumption that the 'Says who?' question is defeated because each individual voter can be held *responsible* for their vote. That does not mean that they can be held personally to account for it, something which the secret ballot is designed specifically to circumvent, but more basically that it can be taken as a free expression of the individual's preferences and values, whatever those may happen to be. Well or ill informed, jejune or carefully considered, paltry or mature, these preferences and values are taken to be that individual's own, and to guide the voting choices of a being in full possession of his or her own will. Only on that assumption, that each individual is exercising what Nozick called 'powers of self-direction', can any claim that a head-counted majority expresses the impartial collective will of the whole community be sustained. Through willing the terms of his or her democratic participation, the individual endorses that collective will in its emergence, but only insofar as that participation represents a freely-willed individual choice. The democratic voter, however prejudiced and misled, must be assumed to be *rational* in the most primitive sense – that what really are his or her reasons for acting actually guide his or her will – otherwise the whole argument to the constructed impartiality of the collective will breaks down.

The fundamental difficulty with democracy in contemporary conditions, however, is that those conditions make that assumption untenable.

Consumerism and choice

To see why, let us consider what might be formulated as the Paradox of Consumerism. This brings together two elements, of which the first can be stated, somewhat long-windedly, thus:

The majority population in the societies of the West and North, to imitate which the rest of the world increasingly strives, spend their lives in the frenzied mobility and obsessive consumption now driving climate and ecological catastrophe, while funding these activities largely by unfulfilling work in a concrete and plastic urban desert.

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The second element, however, may be put more tersely: *They seem to like it.*

The grounds for the two claims constituting this apparent paradox are rather different. The first represents what can be seen by anyone ordinarily honest who takes a disenchanted view of the societies now largely engaged in trashing the planet. The second, however, has to rely on numerous straws in the empirical wind. Among the more obvious of these are the determined resistance shown, as recently for instance by the *gilets jaunes* in France, to attempts to make fuel prices reflect the real ecological costs of current energy usage; the derisory votes (in comparison to what is at stake) obtained by green political parties offering the only policies credibly aimed at addressing the crisis; and, perhaps most depressingly, the rush back to the airports, when Covid-19 restrictions were lifted, of travellers *en route* to holiday locations rendered less and less distinguishable by the effects of mass air travel.

From the terms of this seemingly paradoxical conjunction, different conclusions may be drawn depending on how one interprets the second of its elements. The most frightening such conclusion would be that they really do like it – that is, they like the whole package including the destructiveness. Material ‘progress’, which in its initial wholly justified phase generated (after a bitter political struggle) a decent standard of food, housing and other provision for those whose work turned the wheels of the Industrial Revolution, has latterly become, as Marcuse (1964) long ago pointed out, a combination of bread-and-circuses and cynical bribery to keep capitalism in business worldwide. Thus bribed, it might seem, the majority population now revel in consumerism and positively enjoy ways of living which disdain any limitations felt to be threatened by the non-human natural world, limitations which there is a general consensus (when the matter is considered at all) that more ‘progress’ can always transcend. They therefore vehemently reject any policies that might seriously address the environmentally disastrous consequences of their preferred lifestyles, and will go on being flattered in this rejection by the deeply irresponsible politicians whom their attitudes have spawned. They really do prefer, we should on this account have to accept, shopping malls to mountains, flying and driving to cycling or walking, the television and social media to living interaction; and they will destroy the integrity of the biosphere sooner than voluntarily renounce these preferences.

It is fervently to be hoped, for the credit as well as the future of the species, that this is not how things stand; but there is no denying that it is one possibility suggested by the paradox. Only slightly less frightening would be the interpreta-

tion that the majority population really do like the megalopolitan consumerist lifestyle, even while growing more and more uneasily aware of how destructive it has been to fuel it predominantly through fossil energy. Thus, they are now prepared for a transition away from dependence on that source, provided that the energy itself keeps flowing. They want there to go on being a biosphere, not just out of a dawning self-interested recognition of its necessity as a provider of resources and sinks, but also from a sense that life bounded entirely by shopping malls lacks something crucial. They want their relation to that backdrop natural world, however, as well as to the goods and services provided by the economy, to go on taking essentially the form of shopping. As Kate Soper firmly points out in an interesting and very relevant recent book, this notion of a 'greened consumerism' is basically an oxymoron:

Whatever efforts are made to optimise the efficiency of resource use and to limit carbon emissions, continued economic growth cannot be made sustainable ... more efficient technologies have hitherto always gone together with an overall expansion in resource use and production of more commodities. Since 1945, American energy consumption per dollar of GDP has been cut in half, but energy demand has increased by 40 per cent. In aviation, fuel efficiency has increased by 40 per cent, but total fuel use increased by 150 per cent. (Soper 2020: 41)

Since maintaining the shoppers' paradise in being, however fuelled, thus depends on relentlessly continued growth, in the case of that interpretation too things are terminal for humanity, though perhaps a bit more slowly.

What Soper takes as a licence for hope, however, is a third interpretation: the majority population really *dislike* destructive consumerism, but have been seduced or bullied by capitalism into imagining that they like it, and therefore can perhaps be persuaded to choose alternative ways of living, provided that these options are accompanied by sufficiently far-reaching institutional changes. This has also been the terrain latterly occupied by attempts associated with Tim Jackson and the former UK Sustainable Development Commission to redefine prosperity. Soper's focus is on pleasure (hedonism) rather than 'the good life', as this is supposed to be more democratic – but the move is essentially the same in both versions. A term is identified, such as *prosperity* or *pleasure*, which has good associations on the ruling consumerist paradigm, and then it is shown that *real* prosperity involves things (localised production, more satisfying work...) which consumerism either does not deliver or actively undermines, or that *real* pleasure comes from pedestrianised

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conviviality rather than hassled commuting, from being energetic rather than passively mechanised, and so on. For example,

the machines and lifts and escalators and moving walkways that reduce our energy expenditure do so at the cost of the exertion of muscular power and the sense of vitality that goes along with that (Soper 2020: 129)

– a classic case of the consumerist paradigm depriving us of something which is actively enjoyable as well as good for us. The key trick that the move performs is to retain the good associations from current usage of the respective terms, while redirecting what these terms are taken to signify towards activities which are claimed to be both more individually fulfilling and ecologically non-destructive. And ‘trick’ is often the right word for the sleight-of-hand generally involved. For if you can tell people with a straight face that eco-responsible living, whatever they may have heard, will not only not mean huddling in caves, but will actually *increase their prosperity and pleasure*, it is hoped that this could be more persuasive than telling them the uncomfortable truth – which is that achieving such benefits while avoiding climate catastrophe will come at the price of being colder and dirtier and much less distracted from essentials, that they are going to eat less and their muscles are going to ache more and that everything will be a lot shabbier, more localised and labour-intensive than they have been encouraged to get accustomed to.

Soper of course sees herself as engaged in something much loftier than sleight-of-hand: nothing less, in fact, than creating a revitalised democratic mandate for the changes that will have to come if destructive consumerism is to be transcended:

A counter-consumerist ethic and politics should appeal not only to altruistic comparison and environmental concern ... but also to the self-regarding gratifications of living and consuming differently. It can seek democratic anchorage and legitimation for its claims about the attractions of a post-consumerist lifestyle in already existing ambivalence about and resistance to consumer culture... (2020: 51)

Here, as with redefining prosperity, the dominant note is the win-win register of the Green New Deal and similar projects: as well as improved pleasure, we are to ensure ourselves equality and justice along with reduced emissions and a chance to avert climate catastrophe, all without jeopardising the democratic procedures of electoral politics – through what I have elsewhere characterised, not I think unfairly, as ‘a caucus-race “revolution” in which, somehow, everyone emerges with prizes and *no one gets hurt*.’ (Foster 2022: 128 – italics in original)

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Does Soper really believe in this warm utopian prospect? Her book is characteristic of the genre in being unremittingly chipper, but underneath the confident tone there are unmistakable signs of doubt. One is the palpably willed optimism with which she over-generalises that ‘ambivalence’ about, and supposed dissatisfaction with, consumerist forms of pleasure seeking:

These voicings of discontent . . . remain low-key, diffuse and politically unfocussed. They are the frustrated murmurings of people aware of their impotence to take on the corporate giants and lacking a coherent idea of what to put in place of the existing order. But the regrets and disquiet are real enough... (2020: 45)

– to which the realistic response would be that, while such murmurings of doubt may be audible in North London and similar enclaves, one need only spend some time in a motorway service station or an airport to recognise that describing them as ‘widely-felt’ is wishful thinking. And that Soper really knows this does come out here and there, as in the almost plaintive *cri de cœur* which, dropping her guard a bit towards the end, she permits herself in her Conclusion:

63 per cent of Britons think we are in a climate emergency ... If this is the case they should also be ready to act on their opinions ... Why, for example, are the 63 per cent not doing everything they can to minimise their car use? If even half of car owners did so, it would have a noticeable impact. (2020: 153)

Here, in fact, she comes as near as she does anywhere in the book to admitting what is actually the most plausible conclusion to be drawn from the seeming paradox with which we started this section: that the majority population do not really like destructive consumerism, but cannot desist from it because they have become genuinely *addicted* to it.

If that were to be recognised as the state of the case, the lights by which the advocates of alternative pleasure and prosperity are steering would be decisively changed. For, while the pressures and seductions of capitalism would obviously have a great deal of relevance to an addiction to commodities, the underlying causes of such a condition must run deeper than anything merely economic or political. Addiction, whether individual or collective, is essentially the attempt to meet an unignorable need, for the meeting of which only patently inadequate substitutes are available, so that the need only strengthens with each attempt to placate it, while making repeated such attempts becomes a compulsion. And identifying the unmet radical need which drives commodity-addiction in the majority population must call for a profounder analysis than anything in the tradition of historical

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materialism, in particular any light-green liberal post-Marxism like Soper's, could hope to provide.

I shall offer such an analysis in the next chapter. Pending it, we need in concluding this one to return to the question of epistocracy. We saw that democracy's fundamental assumption, in response to the 'Says who?' challenge, is that each individual sane, adult voter, whether casual or reflective, well- or ill-informed, critically intelligent or crassly prejudiced, can be taken to be fully responsible for his or her political choices. But if we are to treat the possibility of consumerist addiction seriously, this can no longer be claimed for any society in which that condition prevails. Such addiction, being a genuine pathology of the will, something with clear structural similarities to what in other kinds of case would be clinically recognisable disorder, would mean that sufferers from it were precisely *not* in charge of their own choices. For addicts, notoriously, can see their activities as both dangerous and self-destructive, can wish with all their hearts to escape from those activities, and yet find themselves with no effectual power to do so. But those addictive consumer choices, accumulating, are now the main driver of climate and ecological emergency, as well as the source of that implacable popular resistance to emissions-reducing change which is encountered every time it is seriously proposed.

Any politics which might hope to address this state of affairs must evidently therefore be *therapeutically* configured: its crucial premise must be that those who can recognise consumerist, and more broadly materialist, addiction while not themselves subject to it have a duty of care towards those afflicted as well as a general responsibility to deal with the common danger. Correcting society's course away from catastrophe will thus mean a specifically qualified minority guiding the majority towards recovery. And such a configuration clearly sits much more comfortably with an epistocratic than with a democratic conception of proper political authority.

These are clearly large contentions, with implications for environmental-political theory which may fairly be called dramatic. We must next see how far they can be substantiated.

❧ Chapter 12 ❧

Therapeutic Politics and the Authority of Life

In this final chapter, I shall be trying to draw together threads from all that has gone before, in order to offer an answer arising from the whole book to the question with which I closed Chapter 1: how can the politics of environmental crisis make deference to planetary limits into a real force, capable of reshaping present habits, expectations and lifestyles while there is still time?

As that procedure implies, I believe that any hopeful answer to that question must be underpinned and at least tacitly informed by the philosophical understanding of humanity-in-nature which I have called deep naturalism. That understanding, in turn, must consort with recognition that no merely ethical template will capture the real character of our obligations to life at large and across time – indeed, that attempting to deploy such templates has contributed significantly to the ineffectuality, thus far, of humanity’s collective response to its plight. And it must carry with it acknowledgement of the vital role of creativity, as the principle not just of all human action and thought, but of life itself – whether observed empirically or grasped *a priori*.

Bringing all this to bear on the options for an utterly unprecedented political conjuncture will require, unavoidably, the longest chapter in the book. Also inevitable is that the suggested answer to our starting question will be challenging as well (I hope) as hopeful. For the principle of creativity as it works through human life is, as we have seen, something which we can demonstrate but not prove. Correspondingly, confident spontaneous reliance on it can only be something quintessentially culture-borne; and, as I shall argue, conditions in the North and West of the world are now such that any common culture capable of bearing it has largely, and at least for the time being, unravelled. Conventional assumptions about authority and legitimacy which now form the unquestioned background to liberal-enlightened political thought therefore have no place for it, and if our response to potentially-terminal crisis is indeed to be informed by a deep-naturalist understanding of ourselves and nature, we must break free of those assumptions. This, like all such conceptual reconstruction, will be demanding and even painful as well as liberating.

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We may thus by the end of the chapter seem to have gone quite a long way round in order to suggest how our confrontation with climate destabilisation and ecological destructiveness can be re-energised by the fundamental creativity of life. Naturally, I myself think that the whole account hangs together, and so that the full philosophical journey will have been necessary: readers must, of course, judge for themselves.

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The unfinished business of Chapter 11 was to reach an understanding of the consumerist addiction which is driving climate and ecological emergency. To do so, we shall need to consider the conditions in which human lives can be invested with meaningfulness – for it is with the lapse of such conditions that commodities can take on the role of addictive substitute for life-meaning. So this analysis must start with taking several steps back.

The creative principle of life, the impetus that we have seen at work from human free action through the instinctive behaviour of other animals to the growth and exfoliation of plants, is its constantly inventing itself forward organism by organism, in the spontaneous origination of what is, otherwise inexplicably, real. (Inexplicably, because transcending any sufficient explanation out of the relevant past.) Each living thing is permanently in process of actively realising itself on the clue of its own unique particularity and according to the template of its kind, its life-formed way of being what it is. Some lines by the nineteenth-century English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1953: 51) brilliantly capture the vibrant, individuating energy of this impetus:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame,
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; as each tucks string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name,
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same;
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

As that concluding personification makes plain, no issue of life-meaning or purpose can arise for any 'mortal thing' caught up in this irresistible flow of serving – its sole purpose, permanently and necessarily fulfilled, is the constitutive self-realisation comprised by its every action. Each, informed by its life-impulsion, is

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its own point, its own existence the full and unquestionable rationale for why it has come into being.

Human beings, however, can seem not to be like that. Hopkins, the Jesuit priest, explicitly excludes them in the remainder of that sonnet from the category of ‘mortal things’, considering them rather as souls sharing Christ’s immortality, but we need not rely on any such belief-system in order to make the point – we need only invoke once again the reflexive consciousness which characterises the human form of life. For such a consciousness, it might appear, ‘What I do is me’ cannot readily be thought, for its very being seems to lie in the distinction between the subjectivity constituting the ‘I’ and everything which can become object for it, including its own embodiment and actions. Whatever I do must then be attributed to an agent who could very often have done something different, but would, we cannot help supposing, still have been *me* in that alternative case. But then the issue of life-meaning or purpose seems to arise ineluctably for humans out of their very species-nature. For they, unlike (as we should say) all *other* mortal things, are always capable of seeing what they do, and more broadly the patterns of life, the conditioned history and web of relations in which what they do is always involved, as something contingent, something which could have been otherwise *for them*. And then the questions ‘Why thus?’, and by extension ‘So what?’, cannot help but present themselves.

These questions, moreover, are very far from being just idly speculative; they can rapidly become disabling if sufficiently satisfying answers to them cannot be found. As Thomas Nagel observes on this matter in a well-known passage (1979a: 15):

Leading a human life is a full-time occupation to which everyone devotes decades of intense concern ... Yet humans have the special capacity to step back and survey themselves, and the lives to which they are committed, with that detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand.

The awareness of contingency is very liable in this perspective to carry with it an increasingly appalled sense of the game’s being self-evidently not worth the candle. A crucial contributor to that reaction is the way the detached view brings with it the vivid recognition, which other creatures are spared, that we *are* indeed mortal things – that all our endeavours, like those of the ant although more pompously and self-regardingly, will in no very long time come to an end in death. We are so set up that death only becomes real for us in the deaths of others – I cannot actually conceive of the extinction of my own subjectivity, since for me to con-

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ceive of anything is to presuppose that subjectivity. But when I contemplate my life reflexively from the detached perspective, I can view it as if it could have been that of another, and its ending in objective death and dissolution, as observably do those of others, becomes something that I can understand from within as really awaiting me. That recognition can readily threaten to make all my practical and intellectual concerns seem as comically futile as the struggling ant's. In particular, when it is thus borne in on me that I shall be just as dead after a lifetime of effort and attempted achievement as I should have been after one of giving up spinelessly whenever the going got tough, the question 'So why bother *now*?' seems both inescapable and unanswerable.

These possibilities represent human universals, and people have always in the past had strategies for minimising threatened futility by investing their lives with kinds of meaningfulness which the detached perspective and prospect of individual death cannot defeat. Often, of course, these strategies have involved appeal to religious beliefs which deny that prospect, at least as involving individual extinction, and assert that in some sense our personhood survives death. But it emerges on any persistent reflection that such beliefs only postpone the real difficulty. For what is threatened is the idea that one's life has any *point*, and how could its indefinite protraction really address this? The real challenge is rather to establish a sense of significance in one's natural life which its ending in natural death does not remove, and on which half-imagined immortality (if one's culture supplies materials for half-imagining it) can only set a kind of seal.

That challenge, however, is one that has always had to be met with the resources of human creativity. We can demonstrate how and why, by examining one particularly ambitious way of finding one's natural life meaningful. This is the adoption of an explicit life-project, the pursuit of some goal (such as remedying a long-standing injustice, making a ground-breaking intellectual or artistic contribution, or reaching excellence in some demanding physical or mental skill), the full or even partial achievement of which might outlast one and has the potential to make a noticeable difference – or of which one can at all events hope to say, with Yeats (1950: 348),

Let the fools rage, I swerved in naught,
Something to perfection brought.

By no means everyone whose life is meaningful to him- or herself has this kind of mission, which is probably just as well because those who do can make uncomfortable colleagues, partners and parents. But the idea of such a life-project presents

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particularly sharply the paradoxically *unchosen* quality which has to characterise life-meaningfulness generally, and can only be reached creatively.

For consider: your mission in this sense cannot call forth and justify action from you in the way it does simply because you have freely decided to pursue the particular project envisaged. In that case, you could always equally freely *undecide*, or (if you are too far committed for easy retraction) you could decide to take less seriously whatever you are now inescapably involved with – you could cease to let it rule and shape your life. But neither of those options is compatible with the sort of hold over you which a genuinely meaning-yielding life-mission must have. Not only must that hold be strong enough to get you out of bed and back to work repeatedly in the grey cold mornings, it must keep you at it even when – especially when – you are tempted to ease up, compromise or default. In that sense, you have to recognise it as a task allotted you: something about which, when it really comes down to it, you have no choice. (For one thing, such a mission has to guide *all* your major choices, which it cannot do if it depends on any of them.) Nor, however, can you have no choice because it has been merely imposed on you – as missions in the armed services can be, for instance. It cannot have been allocated to you on external authority (or, as Kant would have put it, *heteronomously*), whether by God, or by someone within some human power structure, or even just by your circumstances, heritage or conditioning. For then it could not exercise the kind of inward motivating force, the authentic self-compulsion, which its being specifically your life-mission must consist in, and the whole effect of which is simply to preclude the ‘Why *me?*’ question which such imposition must always leave open.

And yet some people have always been able to give themselves to compelling life-missions, long-term projects and purposes to which they remain faithful through trial and with which their thus keeping faith runs through their lives as a rich seam of meaningfulness, strong to guide action and robust in the face of death. Just as the essence of free action consists, as we saw in Chapter 9, in making yourself up as you go along, pursuing the clues leading out of your past on the template of your human nature, so the essence of being drawn to find a particular life-project waiting to your hand is that, in that process, combining as it does a kind of initial recognition with exploratory adoption and increasing self-identification, you both *discover* your vocation and *constitute* who you are to be thus ‘called’. The shape and scope of the project coalesce in and with the emergent you which realises itself in acceptance of the demands thereby made. Investing oneself in such a life-project commits one to ongoingly becoming oneself on those accepted terms

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from now onwards. And none of these claims about self-realisation make sense until we have understood the process involved as radically creative. In a movement which, if Chapters 9 and 10 have been at all persuasive, we should now recognise as characterising all creativity from that of high art to that of life itself, something summons itself forth and shapes itself into being. The significance-yielding nature of an explicit life-project makes plain how a human self creatively engaged in life can indeed say 'What I do is me – for that I came'.

Now, as I have acknowledged, by no means every human life in which its bearer finds habitable meaning is thus project-shaped or goal-directed. Much more often, such meaningfulness is simply a matter of the individual's experiencing the normal central human satisfactions – those of friendship, love, sexuality, parenthood, work... – as intrinsically valuable, that is, robustly sufficient for being their own point. This is what it is for an ordinary human life to make sense to the person living it in a way which is not undermined by the availability of the detached view and the consciousness of inevitable death. But here too, the character of paradoxical *unchosenness* can be seen to be vital, and to depend on an essential creativity of engagement. That dependence goes with the recognition that a life cannot make sense unless the individual whose life it is actively makes sense of it, and makes it at the same stroke *his or her* justifying sense. Here the far-from-accidental fact that we use the same term, *meaning*, for significance both in life and in language, becomes important and assumes its proper bearing. If we think about the ordinary daily business of making articulated sense, the experience (at which we glanced in Chapter 9) of putting my grasp of some particular issue or idea acceptably into words, it is clear that I can only do this by relying on the senses or meanings with which the words of a shared language are already endowed as I find them ready to my mind and intention. As Leavis (1986: 131) puts this,

a language ... is a vehicle of collective wisdom and basic assumptions, a currency of criteria and valuations, collaboratively determined; itself it entails on the user a large measure of accepting participation in the culture of which it is the living presence.

But equally, such participation is always also self-discovery and self-invention: I have to use those semantic materials to configure what, uniquely and individually, *I mean* here and now in response to this particular call on my expressive resources. We do this, of course, so familiarly and instinctively that we normally do not register what is involved – but, reflected on, it reveals itself to be impossible except as a creative commitment: the sense which I specifically and uniquely want to

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make informs and guides the process through which it comes into existence. First glimpsed in terms of the common stock of word-meanings on which all speakers of the given language must draw, it *becomes itself* – becomes a sense which *I* make – as I shape forth from those materials something specific to my intention in this new meaning-conjuncture. An activity not radically dissimilar to what we saw (also in Chapter 9) in the working of good poetry is here in process: I make out of the common stock of meanings, on which I depend in order to communicate at all, the unique significance which I find really confronting me in this situation.

And thus it is too with making sense of one's life. The unchosen materials out of which such sense is made are more various: they include claims like those of friendship, affection and duty; accepted patterns of relationship, role and status; and many familiar forms of activity. But all these come with significances, acknowledged kinds and degrees of mattering, shared and recognisable within one's relevant community; and enough of them must be combined into a humanly significant narrative structure for one's life-story – the story one is committed to enacting *as* one's life – to be experienced as sufficiently its own point. The process of realising what happens to me, my conditioned situation vis-à-vis these others, this task, this place ... as *my* life, that out of which I ongoingly make myself, is a creative process in which self-discovery and self-invention cannot be distinguished. And it is for the same kind of reason that a life cannot achieve meaning-sufficiency by being devoted to something like keeping one's car polished or one's lawn immaculate, activities which simply do not organise enough of the normal spectrum of human concerns – while the life of a hermit might do so through strenuous renunciation of all of them. As with linguistic meaning, however, a story shaped in terms of these commonly available life-meanings has to realise itself as the individual's own unique story, genuinely to be its own point in the way that resists defeat by the detached perspective. And, as with some explicit life-project, that is achieved through one's making oneself up, developing in active ongoing creativity the emerging story that tells one who, as well as why, one is.

As I have suggested, these are human universals. Even if one lives in the kind of highly-structured, hierarchical and religiously-sanctioned world where one takes it to be God's purpose for one that one lives *this* kind of life (as peasant, merchant, member of the knightly class or whatever), with one's activities, relationships and scope for achievement thereby marked out in advance, still one has to embrace that life as *one's own* – still it must make sense as the sense one makes of oneself, for it to afford habitable significance, although its social givenness may

Creativity: the lost dimension

well have made finding such significance easier than it is today when everyone is beset with apparently open-ended options and opportunities. A much more radical contemporary difficulty, however, is that the hitherto universal and ordinarily available human creative power, the diffused sense of a formative energy at the heart of individual living on which we have seen any form of robust life-meaning to depend, has so thoroughly lapsed across the kind of society with which we now have to reckon. For these societies, a light has almost gone out – it has, at least, burnt right down to the socket – in the illumination from which people had been able to make habitably meaningful lives for themselves, out of a very wide range of more or less imposed or optional life-conditions, since humans began to think about their own lives.

This is a pivotal issue for recognising materialist addiction as now a pervasive condition, so we must consider carefully what grounds there are for the no doubt startling claim just made.

Creativity: the lost dimension

A light of the human spirit has almost gone out – how could one justify such a statement? To what order of social, cultural or psychological phenomena does it point?

The Marxist philosopher and psychoanalyst Cornelius Castoriadis, in his collection of contributions pertinently entitled *A Society Adrift*, has this very relevant observation (2010: 204):

We are living in the first society since the inception of the history of humankind in which religion is no longer central to social life. Why did religion occupy such a tremendous place? Because it reminded you that you are not the master of the world, that you are living on top of the Abyss, Chaos, the Bottomless Pit, that there is something other than humankind ... By the same token, it gave meaning to human life and death ... it reminded humans of their limits, reminded them that Being is unfathomable and uncontrollable.

The language here runs admittedly to somewhat florid touches – the Bottomless Pit, from which, it may be recalled, there issue horse-sized locusts with scorpion stings to torment humankind (*Revelation* 9: 1–12), is not really germane. But Castoriadis nevertheless acutely identifies in these and similar terms the *third dimension* on which contemporary Northern and Western civilisation has lost any firm grasp. This recognition we have already associated in Chapter 7 with deep, in contrast to flat, naturalism. As well as the material world of objects and forces on the one hand, and humankind with its consciousness, beliefs and values on the

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other, there is the dimension (as it were at right-angles to both elements of this duality) in which they both flow from the same source – from what we have since identified as the creative principle of life manifesting itself through our species life-form. It was the achievement of the Scientific Revolution and its philosophical accompaniments, originating with Descartes, to focus more and more exclusively on the two surface dimensions, as we may call them, at the price of occluding the third – a very heavy price, because what was increasingly lost was precisely that awareness of the unfathomable and uncontrollable about which Castoriadis reminds us. For a purely material world confronted only by human conscious agency cannot fail to be taken as essentially at human disposal (again, as Heidegger's 'standing reserve'), at least as far as our agency can for the moment reach. But when we see both that world and that agency to be radically dependent on the inherent creativity of life, we acknowledge a force in which humans can only participate insofar as they accept it as *not* at their disposal. And without such acknowledgement, we find ourselves indeed adrift, in the kind of prevailing attitude to ourselves and to the non-human natural which we noted back in the Introduction as exhibiting a form of insanity, an alienating dislocation at the roots of life.

The decline of religion in the North and West of the world is certainly one very visible form which our failing grasp on the dimension of depth has taken. Persisting traditionally-religious enclaves like the US Bible Belt offer no real counterexample here, since these represent essentially the self-defensive reactions of largely unsophisticated people whose identity is under various kinds of cultural and economic threat, and who turn for security to the correspondingly hysterical affirmation of elderly belief-systems with which their televisions, smartphones and SUVs must be felt at least dimly not to be consistent. This response is in fact as dislocated as any of the more widely characteristic kinds of alienation. But, importantly, it should be apparent from the whole argument of this book that religious decline is *symptomatic*, not fundamental. It evidences the loss and failure which underlie a raft of other symptomatic changes, and may best be described as the collapse of that intuitive living confidence in human creativity which has flourished in all former times, but to which the conditions of advanced scientific modernity have proved peculiarly and almost fatally adverse.

But how could the core principle of life – the sense of creative force working through us to underpin reality – have been thus weakened and attenuated, like an inner light fading nearly to extinguishment, within the collective life and individual experience of so many millions of 'advanced' human beings?

Creativity: the lost dimension

One very major factor has been the increasing distance of most people's lives from the seasonal rhythms of the natural world – contact with which used to be maintained even in cities, which remained in touch with their rural hinterlands until this connection was progressively lost during the nineteenth century. As Lawrence wrote of the Brangwens, long-established English Midland farmers, at the beginning of *The Rainbow*:

heaven and earth was teeming around them, and how should this cease? They felt the rush of the sap in spring, they knew the wave which cannot halt but every year throws forward the seed to begetting, and, falling back, leaves the young born on the earth.

It has not, of course, ceased (nor can it, while the Earth continues to circle the Sun) – even though modern agribusiness has sought to mechanise and channel it. But the very large majority of people in the post-industrial North and West whose food comes from supermarket shelves, much of whose time is spent in urban or megalopolitan surroundings and who see 'the country' mostly through car windows or at best on recreational visits, have ceased to vibrate to it. They neither feel any longer, nor have significant dealings with those who feel, the pulse of the non-human natural in their own blood, and the vitality of its spontaneously creative abundance informing their own energy. It is now of course routine among 'enlightened' people to dismiss this kind of evocation as romantic, and to condemn it as undervaluing all the benefits of 'progress' which have lifted the masses out of rural poverty, at least as materially defined. The observation points, nevertheless, to a deep truth about the modern condition.

Equally disabling has been loss, for an ever-increasing majority, of work which calls on and exercises their full human nature and range of active capacities, instead of reducing them largely to functional units. Without such work, the individual's instinctive creativity – the essential life-drive to express oneself in and through what one becomes oneself by shaping into being – tends to atrophy. It can be recuperated only to a limited extent through self-investment in various recreational or voluntary activities, partly because these can rarely support the sense of centrally human purpose and significance required for a life-narrative, and partly because spending the majority of one's working hours in routinely repetitive functionality configured to mechanised or computerised imperatives drains the ordinary worker of vitality, to such an extent that for his or her leisure only a numbed passivity is left. Yet this is the condition not only of most workers by hand but of increasingly many workers by brain in late capitalism. Even those whose activities involve direct

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engagement with other people tend now to operate within systems which seek to reduce these interactions to algorithmic impersonality, minimising the variety and unpredictability of actual living contact.

A further, and lethally destructive corollary of the general conditions of work and urban existence in late capitalist society has been their spawning proliferating forms of mass entertainment driven by commercial imperatives. This sinks always to the lowest common denominator for its appeal to people reduced by inculcated passivity to the simplest range of responses. Television, cinema and crudely rhythmic music-substitutes distract the popular mind with essentially meretricious material, while the general screen-dependence encouraged by modern technology compounds the human damage. *Screens* in fact very aptly represent the increasing dominance of a glib depthlessness – their apparently irresistible triumph evidenced perhaps most noxiously in galleries like the Louvre and the Rijksmuseum, where great art has to be encountered across a milling throng of people photographing it on their smartphones and moving immediately on to the next exhibit. (Even for those for whom this does not represent merely the ‘cultural’ equivalent of a selfie with a celebrity, what they have captured for looking at later can only be a simulacrum, when they might instead have contemplated the real thing.) All this inevitably degrades any remaining capacity in the wider population for appreciating genuine art as a prime agent and exemplar of human creativity – and correspondingly subverts the cultural authority of those still capable of such appreciation. Hence, again, to make this kind of claim from the standpoint of such authority is readily dismissed as ‘elitist’ by those who have mistaken these developments for a vindication of the democratic impulse. But it still has to be made, and insisted on, in the present context. For not only does the vast bulk of production in what are now ominously called the ‘creative industries’ emanate under such conditions more and more from exhibitionists and unabashed mediocrities, so rendering a vital term unusable (as we noted earlier in passing) for genuinely gifted artists and thinkers. This situation also means that these latter, finding no competent general audience, cannot grow and develop as they need, and their role as standard-bearers for the widespread tacit recognition of creativity as a deep spontaneous human power goes simply undischarged. Correspondingly, the ability to grasp intuitively their possession of this power, and so to exercise it at crucial life-junctures, fades out of the consciousness of ordinary people.

*Consumerist addiction***Consumerist addiction**

The developments which I have here (inevitably) only sketched – secularisation, alienation from the non-human natural, the dehumanisation of work and the evisceration of culture – have now been proceeding in the North and West of the world over an extended period. The first has been in train since the Scientific Revolution undermined the credibility of religious framings and gradually replaced the enchanted cosmos with a material universe, in which humanity was taken, since Darwin, to have emerged by wholly natural means. The second and third have followed on industrialisation as it reshaped long-established patterns of living and working. The last can be traced back at least to the Forster Education Act of 1870 and the arrival of the popular media in response to slowly growing mass literacy thereafter. As the great historian G.M. Trevelyan commented (1944: 248), that legislation produced ‘a vast population able to read but unable to distinguish what is worth reading, an easy prey to sensations and cheap appeals’. Such a thoroughgoing transformation of the conditions of life has of course had a very wide range of consequences, economic, socio-cultural and psychological. But their most fundamental consequence has been a lost instinct for our creative life-dependency – a now very widespread failure of intuitive openness to the deep living energy sustaining the human world of nature, value and significance. This force is *creative* because each of us must realise his or her unique individuality through collaborative expressiveness, in the various ways we have already noted; it expresses *dependency* because what the individual is thus realising is, in Lawrence’s formulation (1915/1949: 40), Tom Brangwen’s knowledge that ‘he did not belong to himself’ – the individual’s givenness as a manifestation of the life which informs his or her life. Or, as Jung puts epigrammatically this vital inner relation: ‘The psychic depths are nature, and nature is creative life’ (1933/2001). A healthy cultural state is one in which ordinary life is lived in unspoken touch with these depths, but the state of our own civilisation now is one of pathological attempted compensation for the massive general failure of that connection. It is characterised across the board by self-reinforcing but wholly inadequate substitutes for the individual human life-purpose and sense of creative agency which people cannot do without, but from which the conditions of such a civilisation comprehensively exile them.

Only an account at this depth gets near to the real roots of pervasive modern alienation. We can observe that religion no longer explains most informed people’s lives to them in any convincing way – but, as we have seen, religious versions of life-purpose needed to be embraced creatively in order to make habitable sense,

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even while they remained widely available. Science is popularly supposed to have demonstrated humanity's cosmic insignificance – but recognition of the physical world as fundamentally the lifeworld shaped forth creatively by the human life-form, and of the interstellar distances as vast only according to metrics expressing the human mind, seriously problematises that picture. A degree of value-pluralism has attended globalisation of economic arrangements, increased migration and the associated growth of racial and cultural heterogeneity in the societies mainly affected – but it is the ongoing collaboratively-creative *constitution* of value which has been failing, and in the absence of which value-contestation becomes strained, partisan and hysterical – on all sides of any so-called 'culture war'. Loss of unthinking attunement to and reliance on that collaborative creativity underlies all these purported explanations for *anomie*.

It is not that creativity has vanished from our lives – it could not, while we remain human. Its tacit role in upholding the lifeworld, as elucidated in earlier chapters, remains in play whether we think naturalistically of the objective realm or practically of our scope as free agents. Very many people still recognise intuitively that in their intimate being, their sexual identities and relations, they cannot 'belong to themselves' – though muddle and confusion in this arena has latterly been metastasising to shocking effect. Real art, if only for a restricted public, is still just imaginable. But key social forms of relationship and activity which articulated the creativity of life back to the individual – work as hard commerce with living realities, sexuality as inseparable from normal reproduction, the availability of and cultural respect for art as real exploration of experience, rather than commercialised simulacra – have all more or less unravelled *pari passu* with the historical developments which I have sketched, and with them has lapsed, frighteningly, conscious creative engagement of the individual across all of his or her life and thought, and more especially in the domain of meaning and value. What follows is that ordinary people's recourse to attempted compensation for that loss acquire potently addictive force. This is an absolutely crucial recognition, when we are considering the materialist consumerism now so pervasive – one which cannot, however, be reached except via the foregoing considerations.

Evidence that it cannot may be drawn from the various contemporary writers who have identified significant relevant features of our plight (not always directly related to the climate and ecological crisis), without seeming to remark, or fully to register, their literally pathological character. Bill McKibben, for instance, in

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his otherwise insightful book *Falter* (2019: 176–78) records these sobering facts about the usage of smartphones and similar electronic kit:

The average person now touches, swipes or taps his phone 2,617 times a day. Eighty-seven per cent of people with smartphones wake up and go to sleep with them ... We spend roughly ten hours a day looking at a screen and roughly seventeen minutes a day exercising ... Teens who spend three hours a day or more on electronic devices are 35 per cent more likely to be at risk of suicide... Three times as many teenagers killed themselves in 2015 as in 2007.

Now of course, some smartphone applications are harmless fun, practically helpful or potentially educational, and some enable genuine communication. But the levels of average usage cited here are very evidently not just driven by a fondness for Wordle, by accessing interesting or useful information or keeping in touch with the family. Rather they are borne on a tsunami of pseudo-communication with pseudo-friends, of pseudo-emotion and pseudo-sex, of pseudo-engagement with ever-multiplying objects of synthetic outrage, and rapidly-intensifying absorption into virtual-world scenarios. And this kind of development simply cannot be explained, as McKibben seeks to do, by the leverage, advertising clout and crass greed of Silicon Valley billionaires. What these data document is very plainly a form of compulsive demand without which Silicon Valley, for all its piratical audacity, would not be in business. The warping of the human spirit which, considered dispassionately, all this represents cannot be blamed purely on capitalism driving a dumbed-down media market, increasingly as that has been happening. Such glaringly perverse attachment to enablers of substitute living must be a dependency-creating replacement for the satisfaction of some profound vital need which cannot be naturally met, and which the substitute can only ever temporarily placate.

Or again, consider what Jens Beckert, a very intelligent German commentator (Director of the Max Planck Institute in Cologne) has to say about the grip that material consumption exerts even over people who are uneasily aware of its climate and ecological implications:

Owning a car and a comfortable home and taking interesting holidays identify a person as belonging to the middle class. At the same time, increasing consumption represents a relative downgrading of all those who cannot keep up. *This creates a theoretically unlimited momentum towards consumption irrespective of material needs.* (Beckert 2025: 102)

The italics are mine, expressing a point which had also been made forcefully by Robert and Edward Skidelsky thirteen years earlier (2012), though without the

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climate reference. But what could have translated such a basic interpersonal dynamic as the negotiation and consolidation of identity into a matter of competitiveness over mere *commodities* in the first place? – we are far too habituated to not being startled by the strangeness of this reductive move. How can the various items of *stuff* which you acquire, or the more-or-less expensive activities in which you visibly engage, be experienced as anything but finally accidental to your identity? While it is a longstanding human failing to forget that the rank is but the guinea stamp, that regrettable amnesiac tendency is surely not strong enough to generate ‘*unlimited* momentum towards consumption’: even corroborated middle-classness must fall in any theoretically infinite perspective. But Beckert fails to push his analysis to this point, where he might have had to recognise that something literally pathological must be involved.

The Australian economist and social commentator Clive Hamilton does catch the note of the pathological in the chapter on ‘Identity’ from his book *Growth Fetish*:

The fleeting sense of power that comes with a purchase simply leaves a greater void to be filled. It is like struggling to get out of a quicksand – by struggling, we just sink deeper ... we continue to be assailed everywhere, every day of our lives, by messages that affirm the power of money ... Those who are driven to ever greater accumulation of things are driven by inner urges and unmet need that they neither understand nor control. (Hamilton 2003: 78)

This effectively captures the ideas of an unfillable hole and of the compulsion nevertheless to go on attempting to fill it. But the image also misleads: it is not *really* like struggling in a quicksand, because a quicksand is an external danger into which you will have blundered by mistake, whereas the drive to ‘ever greater accumulation’ is, as he recognises, something internal to the will. The struggle, that is, is not fundamentally against capitalism’s constant assault of expectations and incitements from without, although that obviously plays a major disposing role. It would be nearer the mark to say that in this condition one is helpless in the shifting sands of *oneself*: the vital creative robustness which shapes out and realises identity from within has lapsed, and with it that inner energy in the absence of which attempts to supply identity from outside the self cannot provide support or any firm psychological footing.

Identity and life-meaning or purpose are intimately related, as we have seen: in enacting as significant a narrative of your life, you bring ongoingly into being who you really are. As the creative power to achieve such self-realisation fails, however, people do not just give up on living purpose, since they need it as much

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as they need air to breathe: not merely the *ad hoc* tasks and goals with which daily life presents them, but a pattern of settled purposes organised into a sense made of life through the pursuit of what is felt to matter more generally. (See, for instance, Frankl 1984 on this primacy of the need for meaning.) But the pursuit of what thus matters depends on the collaborative confirmation of robustly interpersonal significances and values, and since this process too is creative and has failed, people increasingly substitute for what matters simply what clamours to be pursued. Here is the root of materialist addiction as overwhelmingly *ersatz* life-purposiveness, taking the form of a craving for commodities or commodified experiences which in turn drives relentlessly rising emissions from the fossil-fuel economy and the equally relentless destruction of biosystems laid under contribution as raw materials.

We should therefore take very seriously, and not just as an apt metaphor, the characterisation of such behaviour as addictive, with clear structural similarities to what would be identified as such in the individual case. Any addiction starts, as already noted, by meeting a real need not with a genuine satisfier of that need, which for various reasons may not be available, but with a substitute satisfier which only temporarily satisfies and on repeated inputs of which the sufferer then becomes dependent. The resulting dependency can be chemical-somatic, as with addictive substances, but it can also be psychological: 'Addiction tricks people by sending them after things that can never meet their needs in the long run', as Jenny Svanberg puts it in *The Psychology of Addiction* (2018: 2). That is how a natural need for life-meaning develops into an inherently unfillable hole in the soul – *inherently* unfillable, because awareness of the need always goes with and is reinforced by recognition of the inadequacy of the substitute satisfier, so that the hole deepens with each attempt to fill it. (Only in the human soul could there be such a paradoxical hole, because only humans can hold that double attitude to the 'satisfiers' which they pursue.) The role of these substitute satisfiers is then so very readily taken by *commodities*, because the capitalist dynamic supplies such an easy replacement for purposiveness in the form of competitive acquisition. Capitalism, familiarly, tends to commodify and marketise everything it can – to turn not just bodily necessities and material goods but a whole gamut of other desirables, from entertainment and adventure through education and health all the way to beauty and virtue, into items available for sale and purchase. That transmutation, equally familiarly, interacts with ordinary human psychology to turn acquisition of these various commodified entities into sources of excitement (or at least, of boredom-alleviation), modes of self-assertion and vehicles of status-display. But what is fun-

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damentally addictive about the relation of the majority population to this process is the way the restless churning of commodities, endemic to capitalism's central competitive drive, supplies such a powerful form of substitute life-direction. The logic of capitalist production, distribution and exchange dictates a constant quest for novelty and 'improvement' in the relentless pursuit of market advantage; and keeping up, or attempting to keep up, or even just aspiring to keep up with this dynamic provides people who 'find their soul in commodities', as Marcuse put it (1964: 11) – in iPhones, cars, flat-screen televisions and holiday flight-packages, to update his examples – with a permanently available source both of apparent autonomy and of apparent point in their lives, so long as the addicted pursuit can be maintained.

It should not need saying – but sadly, in our current intellectual climate, it probably does – that one is not in such observations seeking to *blame* ordinary people for succumbing thus to materialist addiction. Their pervasive dependency, culturally disinherited and vitally disempowered as they are, represents no kind of fault. But it remains a fact, and the widespread enlightened prejudice against 'elitism' is strongly disposed to misconstrue the finding of fact here as an exercise in finding fault. A critical account of the conditions of addiction is, correspondingly, readily mistaken for a critique of the addicted, and the protest that this is neither necessary nor intended will tend to meet with ironic dismissal. The conditions in which these reactions predominate are, equally, now socio-cultural facts: all one can do to counter the dismissal is to ask the reader to judge dispassionately, from the full surrounding context of the book, as to the actual spirit in which this account is offered.

Commodity addiction, it must also be stressed, is a form of specifically *cultural* insanity. It needs to be distinguished as such from the increasing prevalence of individual mental illness, (now affecting, for instance, one in six people every week in England according to the mental health charity MIND)¹ which accompanies it, but there are causal links in both directions. When the human sense made by a culture becomes perverse and distorted, the individual's chances in his or her ordinary daily struggle for balance and proportion, and for the hopeful expression of unblocked life-energy in action, are correspondingly lessened. An established way of human living which does not offer genuinely habitable life-meaning inevitably

1. See <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/statistics-and-facts-about-mental-health/how-common-are-mental-health-problems/#one> (accessed June 2025).

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puts the individual psychic health of its participants at significant risk: the anxious, the obsessive, the depressed, the gender-questioning and others variously at odds with themselves are more likely to be tipped into clinically recognisable disorder in a culture presenting them with no coherent image of human wholeness. But even about those who exhibit personally no symptoms that could fairly be called pathological, there must by the same token be questions. For what drives, reinforces and legitimates the collective malaise, other than the accumulating choices of 'normal' individuals? People prepared to sit for hours in queues at ports or airports in order to make emissions-heavy trips to foreign places ever less distinguishable from those they are leaving; people who spend a quarter of their waking lifetimes passively absorbing screened simulacra of life; above all, people 'distracted from distraction by distraction' in the marketplace, unable either to resist the pressures of consumerist expectation or to get anything but brief palliation of life-emptiness from the results – all these we must surely recognise as, at least, not unambiguously sane. Or rather, we might call them sane enough in managing their lives, but only dubiously so in virtue of the lives which they have to manage. And the climate and ecological consequences of this genuinely collective derangement are now imminently threatening us all.

That derangement is not too strong a term for such a collective condition, and that a failure of confidence in human creativity lies at the root of it, should be confirmed from a glance at what has happened quite generally to values and to their place in the contemporary discourse of the societies afflicted. Value has the same kind of existential status as life-meaningfulness – unsurprisingly, since they are so intimately related; it is continuously created and upheld by human life-energy. In the case of value this energy goes into the collaboration of individuals set up by reflexive consciousness (as described in Chapter 7) to encounter their motivations as normative, and thereby as necessarily having interpersonal force. Values are standing reasons for actions recognised in practice by communities of reflexively-consciousness individuals. But although they are as such not chosen by anyone in particular, nor are they imposed on him or her as they would be if they expressed ideological or any other form of dominance, or were merely laid down by God or by habit. Rather they are *tradition-borne* in the sense that they always come to us out of the recognised past, but always only as realised, embodied and sometimes recast through life-sensitive dialogical interaction in the current of our shared practices. The profound human need for this kind of ongoing creative-interpretive activity is now, however, radically unmet in a society which has lost

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the general recognition of human creativity on which it depends. In its absence, not only can values no longer be distinguished from the preferences of different groups, constituencies, persuasions and predilections, but the burden of upholding these preferences *as if* they were values is thrown back on the will, seeking *ultra vires* to will what can only be encountered as unwilling if it is genuinely to be encountered at all. This process means that essentially contestable preference-clusters are policed increasingly relentlessly by their adherents – a policing which can take the form of armed zealotry, but which more usually operates either through surges of ‘traditionalist’ mass-psychosis or through the essentially similar mechanisms that we know as ‘political correctness’. But genuine value, the impersonal authority of which we need for any hope of living meaningfully, simply cannot consort with the committed grinding of any kind of axe. So hysteria confronts hysteria and contrasting fantasy constructions clash in a form of street-fighting amid the ruins of a genuinely humane culture, where once was deployed an intuitive sense of the way in which what matters is collaboratively created, by and for all of us.

Much more could and should be said about cultural derangement, but our focus here must remain on its most immediately and destructively dangerous form: its driving the whole world towards climate and ecological catastrophe. And here, when we concede (as clearly we should) that the role played by global capitalism in bringing on the climate emergency and rendering it so intractable must be urgently addressed, and when we identify those with vested interests in defending that system as needing somehow to be restrained or removed, we should not confine ourselves comfortably to incriminating the glitterati billionaires, the oil sheikhs and coal barons and the mendacious CEOs of global corporations. Nor is it even enough to point, as do Andreas Malm and Wim Carton in their powerful recent book *Overshoot* (2024), to the structural features of capitalism which tie so much shareholder value across the whole economic system into the extensive assets of oil, gas and coal still in the ground, and which any public policy remotely adequate to the emergency would have to leave there. Certainly, as Malm and Carton demonstrate, this dependency gives the capitalist system itself a vested interest in refusing to strand these assets, and so in continued fossil fuel usage, generating an irresistible drive to miss every target for global temperature limitation set from the Paris Agreement onwards, accompanied by compensatory fantasies about retrieving these inbuilt overshoots with as-yet-aspirational technological interventions at comfortably future dates. But, as they fail to note, these potential fuels would not exert such malignant potency, indeed their very status as *assets* would be in question, did

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not people at large so helplessly crave the commodified pseudo-satisfactions which fossil power so unprecedentedly enables. Thus, the most fiercely vested interest in the continued operation of this engine of planetary destruction is at present the interest of the ordinary consuming majority in preserving the kind of civilisation which ours has become, because that represents the overmastering interest of the addict in maintaining continuity of supply. And that is a compulsion the grip of which remains unweakened, here as in individual forms of addiction, merely by knowing that continued dependence will have lethal consequences. It is in diagnosing and dealing with that compulsion in its whole context of profound cultural malaise, that the real challenge for any hopeful politics of practice must now lie.

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So we come back to the question of political authority, and specifically of whether the present emergency calls for it to be epistocratically configured; but now, in full recognition of how and why the issue has also this unavoidably therapeutic dimension. A hopeful politics, if we are still to act from hope (and how else could we act?) must save contemporary civilisation not only from climate and ecological catastrophe, but from itself, from what it has more and more damagingly become. Such a politics will only count as hopeful insofar as it addresses curatively the profound malaise or affliction of spirit lying at the root of our external plight. And it will only do that if it comes not out of informed and imaginative intelligence alone, but out of the creativity which must so urgently be rediscovered and re-empowered.

But then, what of democracy? Even if the majority of voters are no longer in a condition where they are genuinely in charge of their own choices, so that defending democratic process as the collective expression of individual self-responsibility fails in this new, addictive context, there remains the crucial issue of *consent*. The authority of any government which does not hold down its population by sheer terror must, it can seem, rest in one way or another on the consent of the governed, their general ongoing acknowledgement of its legitimacy in issuing orders, making regulations and enforcing these edicts as necessary. Democratic forms have been seen at least since Locke as guaranteeing the unforced and rational nature of such consent: if everyone has an equal voice and a majority of voices decides, then government acting in accordance with those decisions exerts an authority which is in effect lent to it by each person who will be called on to submit to it. Although this legitimising role is undermined by failure of the equal voices to express genuinely self-responsible autonomy in those from whom they proceed, it will – crucially –

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not seem so to those involved: it is enough that they *take* themselves to be acting autonomously (as the self-deluding addict can still often do). They may then, if they come to feel that they are not being recognised in that capacity, feel also that their consent is being unwarrantably relied on, and governmental authority will lapse.

But there is a key assumption at work in this kind of argument, which Estlund expresses concisely when he notes, as something ‘often held’, that ‘obligations to do as we are told can never simply befall us. We are never under the authority of another person unless we have consented to be.’ (Estlund 2008: 117) The idea here is that no interpersonal authority-relations are simply *owed to nature*: such relations always arise artificially, through some institutionalising process. Humans *erect*, for various good and bad reasons, any structures of super- and subordination within which they thereby consent to conduct their lives. This understanding of our situation came increasingly to the fore as people ceased to believe that traditional patterns of rule by kings, nobles and other masters reflected a hierarchy imposed throughout nature itself by God (the so-called ‘Great Chain of Being’). In Locke and those influenced by him it took the form of a claim that the only *natural* authority in the domain of action is that which the individual exercises over him- or herself, in an imagined ‘state of nature’ where each was supposed to have enjoyed ‘perfect freedom to order their actions and dispose of their possessions and persons ... without asking leave or depending on the will of any other man’ (Locke 1690/1946: 4) – each being thus ‘absolute lord of his own person and possessions’. (63) The political power of governments is then constituted by individuals’ surrendering this inherent ‘lordship’ to a recognised executive for prudential reasons, in pursuit of effective common security. We may recognise this particular construction of the issues as a performative myth, with actually-subsisting political and property relations being read back into a pristine state from which they are then purportedly derived. (The notion of lordship over *oneself*, taken at face value, is conceptually problematic: if I tell myself to do something, and then neglect to do it, am I disobeying myself, as I must surely be doing if anything properly to be called lordship is in the frame, or am I just changing my mind?) The basic point which the myth is reinforcing, however, remains. The idea that the power of one individual over another, while it can often be explained, can never be *justified* simply in terms of their respective natures, strengths and capacities, has been a founding political presupposition of the modern era.

As such, it has been a remarkably resilient conception. But perhaps the most remarkable thing about it is the way in which it is actually belied by the proceedings

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of almost any human group challenged to act collectively in any matter of serious import. When people are set such a common task, experience honestly consulted shows that, almost invariably, some member of the group who combines relevant knowledge and insight with a degree of personal force will emerge as the effective formulator, coordinator and director of the required effort. He or she will do so from any formal position vis-à-vis the rest – that is, by no means necessarily as the chairperson, manager or even platoon sergeant (though the process tends to be bumpier, the more rigid the established hierarchy within which it is operating). The person in question, that is, will be invested jointly by nature, in the shape of various personal qualities and capacities, and by the particular circumstances, with *natural authority* or leadership status in relation to the shared activity demanded from the group as a whole. Correspondingly, other group members will be placed, by the same process and for the given purpose, in a position of natural subordination or followership. And crucially, the issue of justifying those respective relations will not then remain to be addressed, but will have been subsumed by their mode of naturally arising.

An example will make this clearer, and I borrow one from Estlund, not only for its perspicuity but because the moral which he wants to draw from it, being revealingly different, helps to set the immediately foregoing point in sharper relief. Consider, he says (2008: 124), a situation where a plane has crashed and a flight attendant takes it on herself to assume control of the survivors' efforts to help the injured amongst them. Important for the case imagined is that this is not the captain, who maybe died in the crash, nor some important passenger, but someone of ordinarily fairly junior status who rises to the need to take charge. The passengers to whom in this scenario she will give instructions have what Estlund sees as a duty to accept – that is, to consent to – her authority under those circumstances, and they have such a duty, he argues, because that is clearly going to be the most efficient way to organise help (which would only be impeded by disputes over who should coordinate action), and they have a moral duty to help the injured. But if any passenger reasoned thus to the conclusion that he did indeed have to do as the flight attendant told him, it should be clear enough that doing so would constitute what Bernard Williams in a different context (1981: 18) identified as 'one thought too many'. In fact, the passenger should just, deploying one thought fewer, recognise himself as naturally subordinated by her competent initiative and personal force in this situation, and simply as so subordinate obligated to follow her instructions. His 'duty' to act in accordance with his subordination is not derived at

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one remove from a moral duty, but is something much more instinctive, emergent and immediate. Natural authority, whenever really encountered in a challenging life-situation, *creates* its own natural justification.

The creativity inherent in the sort of interaction exemplified here is indeed of the essence. Leadership in human affairs means going out in front – at one time literally (as when the clan chieftain was expected by his warriors to lead the battle-charge in person), but more usually in these latter days metaphorically. In speech and action, the leader, the person with natural authority in and for the given occasion, goes out ahead to articulate an emerging common will among the individual members of the group, and to initiate the collaborative activity through which that will pursues its ends. The leader, by what he or she says and does, realises for the group being led the shared intentions which, unled, it would be unable to recognise or grasp as such – because they would not have come into being as such without the leader's prompting. A group considered merely as an aggregation of distinct persons cannot *will* or have *purposes*, any more than it can have experiences, since it has no collective centre of conscious attention – only individual minds have that feature. The will and purpose driving any collective activity can only be those of its acknowledged leader for the time being and for the given challenge. (And if the group has a 'leadership team', then that in turn needs to be led – purpose can ultimately be a configuration only of individual mind.) But the creative processes of expression and endorsement are what can nevertheless establish such an individual will as a really *shared* will, a genuinely common will and substantively real as such.

The best way to grasp what this process involves is to think of a paradigm creative activity such as the writing and reading of a poem. The poet exercises his or her gifts in producing an expression of personal perceptions and emotions, which must for all that be an artefact of the common language in which (as a condition of its intelligibility, and so of its original significance for the poet) other minds can meet, realising it as their own experience. And what is thus established, in responsibility to the possibilities of language and experience, as something inherently shareable, is also very evidently something real. Creativity here, as in any field of its genuine operation, brings into focus a reality, beyond the creator in a common world, which the creator's expressive powers are both responsible *for*, and responsible *to*.

Human leadership, too, has an essentially expressive-creative role. The leader's words and actions create something real that was not there before – a shared purpose or intention for the group, and the group's existence *as* a group *in* shared

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purpose, in expressing which for endorsement and pursuit, the leader at the same time serves the real collective will which only emerges in that created purpose. Through this creative-expressive agency of those with leadership gifts – insight, attentiveness, articulacy, focus, determination, aptness for responsibility – human groups both constitute their goals and organise themselves ongoingly around the pursuit of them. The leader together with those led thus constitute themselves as a collective agent. The leader stands to the group's activity as the creative writer to the responsive community of appreciation and empowered intelligence constituting his readership. Leaders, we might say, are the poets of praxis. A further advantage of this analogy is that it helps us to see more clearly how obligations of *followership* go with leadership as its essential corollary. Followership characterises those for whom the leader creates the possibility of meeting collaboratively in shared goals and common action. Crucially, this is not the commonality of the flock all starting to drift in one direction, but a specifically human community of conscious intention which is realised in and through the interaction of leader and followers, their meeting in the articulation and pursuit of shared goals. Followers *are* followers, so constituting themselves as a collaborating group, through their ability to respond co-creatively to natural authority in its formulation of goals, strategies and priorities.

These dynamics organise all 'political' activity, from the level of the *ad hoc* committee trying to set up a community enterprise all the way to that of national government and international collaboration. At those higher levels they will be recognised as expressive of what Max Weber famously described as *charismatic* authority, as opposed to authority exercised on the basis of tradition or from within a rational-legal system of accepted rules and procedures. *Charisma* comes from an ancient Greek root-word meaning a gift or grace of God, and was used by Weber himself, certainly in his earlier writings on the topic, with deliberately heroic and sub-Nietzschean connotations: its possession in the outstandingly gifted leader compels 'the surrender of the faithful to the extraordinary and unheard-of, to what is alien to all regulation and tradition as therefore is viewed as divine'. (Weber 1968: 1115) The later account in his 'Politics as a Vocation' lecture (1919/2004) moderates this tone somewhat, but still retains the somewhat Dionysiac vibration, which rather gets in the way of our recognising that we are dealing here with what is essentially the concept of natural authority – that is, with something which also operates, and often quite mundanely, to underlie the other forms which Weber distinguishes. For traditional authority indicates merely a structure in which natural authority is looked for (and often found, since the expectation can elicit

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it) in members of a certain historically-sanctioned caste or strain of heredity. And as for rational-legal structures: these represent the mode in which we often try, unavailingly, not to acknowledge the creativity which we have latterly mislaid the intuitive capacity to recognise. So the leader must, we democratically insist, 'take the group with' him or her, must not speak out beyond his or her brief, must defer to the consensus, must put anything significant to the vote, and so on. But what is overlooked by all these procedural formalities of constraint is that the terms of the proposed consensus, the framing of the motion or the order of the agenda must have themselves been creatively initiated (they cannot themselves be voted on, without introducing an obviously vicious regress), and for this we must always come back to the typically quiet exercise of natural authority. Such authority, and the corresponding subordination, are in fact the fundamental principles on which all significant collaborative human activity becomes possible.

Weber's inclination to offer a heroic, quasi-Dionysian characterisation of charisma does however reflect a vital recognition: that what is manifested in all these ways and at all these levels is a radical force of life itself, something *given*, as the etymology of *charisma* makes plain. Natural authority as it arises for the organisation of collective action is a form of creative power, and such life-power, operative in whatever field of human endeavour, comes from beyond the individual through whom it flows. D.H. Lawrence, himself a passionate centre of creative energy, speaks this truth most clearly:

Power comes to us, we know not how, from beyond. Whereas our will is our own ... From beyond comes to us the life, the power to live, and we must wisely keep our hearts open ... Either it is given us from the unknown, or we have not got it. And better to touch it in another than never to know it. (Lawrence 1937: 146, 148, 156)

Natural authority and its direct claim on followership is born from this source beyond will, through the life-energy of a wide variety of protagonists 'elected' to leadership by particular situations at all levels of human collaboration. In the light of everything that we have recognised about creativity in Chapters 9 and 10, natural authority in all its forms is properly to be encountered as expressive of the *authority of life* – as a major mode of life in its specifically human form, inventing itself creatively forward through all the manifold exigencies of circumstance.

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Epistocracy is the form of natural authority called forth by situations where the challenges of collective action are of such complexity, and exhibit such a degree of information-dependence, that they elect to leadership roles those with higher intelligence and greater imagination, as well as the necessary personal force. (I recur to the verb *elect* to emphasise how those so chosen out by nature and circumstance will be very properly an *élite* in the correct sense of that much-abused and now so often thoughtlessly abusive word.) The authority of the therapist is a variant form, residing not just in informed knowledge of the condition to be dealt with, but in the various human-relational capacities involved in sympathetic grasp of the sufferer's experience while maintaining an appropriate curative distance. It follows from all we have said in this and the preceding chapter that our present unprecedented climate and ecological plight now demands to be addressed through a political effort overtly combining and explicitly exerting natural authority in both these forms. We have passed, that is, well beyond the point where any attempt to address this plight through the rational-legal channels of a profoundly compromised democracy could retain any hope of success. We are in a total human-natural situation, to comprehend which fully along the lines I have laid out is to recognise with the late James Lovelock, the pioneering theorist of Gaia, that democracy must at least be put on hold, at least for the time being (Lovelock 2010). Governmental power in the societies which must lead the required transformation must be ceded to an appropriately qualified epistocratic-therapeutic political protagonist – if we can find one – for there to be any hope of avoiding comprehensive and final disaster.

That is a drastic requirement, and one that is likely to be widely unwelcome. Democracy has for so long been the default political arrangement in these societies, and has for so much of that time actually represented a vital impulse of social development – equality of voice has for so long been the thematic performative myth of a levelling industrial and technological civilisation – that calling it into question tends to be treated as at best an intellectual solecism, and at worst a form of indecency. Quite aside from these reactions, the difficult issue of where to identify an acceptable alternative must also be grappled with if the conclusion is to carry any persuasive force – though doing so is going to call for empirical rather than theoretical enquiry. (I return briefly to this point at the end of the chapter.) But enough has already been said to make it plain that democracy's inadequacy to the challenge of the present emergency is not just epistemic, as a particular variant for present conditions of the longstanding epistocratic case against it. We are not

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faced here just with majority ignorance, misinformation and poverty of imaginative resources, important though all those have been, and remain, in the aetiology of climate and ecological crisis. The more basic, clinching inadequacy, powerfully reinforcing all these factors, lies in what can only be diagnosed as a pathological addictive corruption at the roots of that majority's decision-making capacity, stemming from a very widespread collapse of tacit confidence in human creativity.

That is not, it must be emphasised, a purely negative conclusion. It seeks to establish on a conceptual footing a recognition of democratic failure and inadequacy which many observers of our present plight must have reached empirically, if only they could have allowed themselves to admit it. But by the same token, and on the same footing, it involves also a new, positive acknowledgement of the fundamental role of natural authority, *living* authority, in human affairs. Or perhaps we should call this a *renewed* acknowledgement, albeit driven by the urgent contemporary need for such authority to be realised in specifically epistocratic form. For it is essentially an uncovering of what has all along remained the case, though overlaid until recently by the long Enlightenment attempt, motivated by a rational-egalitarian ethics, to reduce political authority to a matter of head-counting. It is a revived recognition that natural authority in one form or another structures and underpins all political interaction, from the most local and informal to the level of the organised state and beyond. It could bring with it a post-Enlightenment recovery – and hopefully, perhaps still just in time – of the vital role of such authority, inevitably (given the nature of the emergency) taking epistocratic form, but fundamentally expressive of the creative principle of life itself, in addressing our now almost literally desperate human condition. A vanguard minority acting creatively out of that condition constitutes *humanity's* due acceptance of natural limits, however reluctantly actual majorities must then be brought to comply.

That is, I believe, as far as environmental philosophy, as it merges into political philosophy, can properly take us. The question of where we might hope to find a political protagonist to act as bearer of creative epistocratic-therapeutic authority through our current travails, is as I have said an empirical one – although our trying to answer it must clearly aim to inform itself as far as possible by the conceptual considerations which this book has explored. And of course, as I have also noted, without at least plausible practical answers, the theoretical critique and analysis must end up hanging frustratingly in the air. I have argued in previously published work (Foster 2022: 154–77) that those comprising such a vanguard protagonist are likely to belong to, or at any rate to have been nurtured by, the

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broadly 'green' movement which has emerged and developed over the past sixty years. That argument, I think, still stands. But the route to it which has led, in the present book, through deep naturalism equips us for grasping more perspicuously than from that earlier presentation how such a vanguard might indeed, considered in ideal terms, claim to speak and act with all the authority of life itself.

Deep naturalism is a meta-perspective. It is how the human perspective on the world, to which we are empirically committed, appears from the perspective of the wider life of which our lifeworld is one manifestation. But of course, *life* as such cannot actually take such a view or have such a perspective. A perspective is something available only to reflectively conscious subjectivity: this just follows from the concept of a perspective, and what seems also to follow is that only humans (among creatures of which we know) really *have* perspectives on the world. So when we talk about 'the perspective of wider life', what we can only be talking about is how things appear to human beings who are trying to see things as it were through the eyes of that life – or better, trying to let what sees things through *their* eyes, be more *like life* than it is like either their own individual subjectivity or the collective identity formed out of the common assumptions and preoccupations of humankind, neither of which ways of seeing would escape anthropocentricity. This is the real force of the idea of self-identification with life which Naess so muddles by turning it into a kind of grossly ballooning Self. People whose openness to that perspective puts their individual lives in touch with the force or principle of life working through them from beyond them, will be protected against commodity-addiction, by the sense that whatever they find to be the organising clue of their own purposes must always be life-responsible – in a way which iterated compensatory consumption very palpably is not. They will thus by the same token acquire additional specifically *epistemic* qualifications for an epistocratic role, because they, unlike the commodity-addicted, will be free from the constant temptation to screen out or minimise the inadmissible full truth about our climate and ecological plight in order to shield from uncomfortable scrutiny their ongoing reliance on meaning-substitutes. But more than that, they will in their thought and actions be redemptively open, even if only tacitly, to living from and channelling the creative force of which our civilisation must recover a vibrant living sense if it is to survive – or indeed, deserve to survive.

To sum up, in fact, the book as a whole: the intuition at the heart of the green movement, understanding itself properly as a creatively deep naturalism and issuing in forms of what Wordsworth called 'natural piety' – a respect for life

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undistorted by strained attempts to over-extend morality – constitutes this civilisation's potential for full recognition of its profound malaise. And the action of that movement is now our only hope for a potentially therapeutic confrontation with that sickness.

The onus of responsibility on those active within that movement is thus epochally heavy. How its discharge might all play out in practice is broadly a matter for sociopolitical rather than philosophical consideration, and so beyond the scope of the present book. But a final point emerging from this and the previous chapter is worth making. The supersession of democracy by an ecologically-informed elite has, of course, been explored and even advocated before, (see Ophuls 1997; Shearman and Wayne Smith 2007; Wainwright and Mann 2018). But it has not been canvassed on the terms on which I am here canvassing it – specifically, as a *creative-therapeutic* response to the deficiencies of democracy which the environmental context makes now so apparent. The whole point about such a response is that it is inherently open-ended. Leadership by creative natural authority makes new opportunities, and any therapeutic intervention can be transformative in unforeseeable ways. So the balance to be struck between, say, a centralised eco-Leviathan state and bio-regionalist structures of devolved power is precisely *to be struck*, as evolving circumstances make possible. Evidently the nature of the emergency suggests that a saving vanguard will need to start by commandeering the powers of the centralised state, because those powers will be required to impose urgent limits on various forms of economic and resource-consumptive activity, and that will inevitably involve a degree of initial compulsion. But what can be made of public response to that compulsion – how far constructive public involvement through deliberative fora such as citizens' assemblies, and the empowerment of devolved authorities – can then proceed, will not be matters determinable beforehand. The effects of genuinely creative real-world interventions cannot in the nature of the case be predicted – which is not to say that we should not now be directing the full force of intelligent empirical attention and enquiry onto these life-and-death issues.

But the strictly philosophical work concludes here. It has been spurred, as I claimed in the Introduction, by the need to grapple with the overriding challenge of our time. Since that challenge takes the form of an existential crisis, what has duly emerged here as environmental philosophy is an attempt to rethink human-natural relations down to their ground. Such rethinking, done responsibly, can still only take us to the brink of the revitalised practical-political organisation and activity for which our condition cries out. But I hope to have shown that in avoiding the

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false trails both of environmental ethics and of an over-ethicised political theory, it can certainly take us that far.

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Philosophy has overwhelmingly considered our environmental responsibility as a moral issue. But it is something much deeper and more important than that.

The ethical template fails because obligations to the future or to nature which can only be arbitrated by present humans can only be pseudo-obligations. This accounts for much of the procrastination and bad faith that has dogged the sustainability agenda. But our real responsibility is to understand the natural world as reflecting humanity's species life-form just as the lifeworlds of other creatures reflect theirs. This we can only do out of the creativity of life working through us. And that 'deep naturalist' understanding demands a revolution in how we think about the politics of climate and ecological crisis.

This is a book both for those new to environmental philosophy and for those dissatisfied with it. Parts I and II provide a concise critical introduction to the subject as hitherto practised, while Part III offers an original and far-reaching alternative, of which Part IV explores the political implications. The whole approach thus speaks to a wide range of interests in how philosophy bears on the crucial challenge of our time.

John Foster is a freelance philosophy teacher and an honorary Teaching Fellow in Philosophy at Lancaster University. He is the author of various books including, most recently, *Realism and the Climate Crisis: Hope for Life* (2022).

'Foster is a uniquely serious voice in contemporary environmental philosophy.'

Rupert Read, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy and Co-Director of the Climate Majority Project



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